MARCELLE THE MAD

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MARCELLE THE MAD

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MARCELLE THE MAD

By

SETH COOK COMSTOCK

D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
NEW YORK
1906

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MARCELLE THE MAD

CHAPTER I

AS TOLD BY MONSIEUR VIGNOLLES

FAR and wide flew the grim summons.

The peasant of Luxembourg, wending his weary way homeward through the twilight, started at the loud clatter of hoofs on the poplar-lined road behind him and leaped aside barely in time to give the scurrying messenger free passage. The mill-hand of Flanders checked his beast in its monotonous round and forgot his grist in staring at this sudden apparition. The simple man of Burgundy gazed searchingly from under his red-stained hand, then left his dripping wine-press and hastened to his neighbour's to learn what was afoot. (Alas, his hand was soon to be dyed even more deeply, but in far different fashion!) In distant Artois, my lord, returning with his merry company from the hunt, met the flying courier at the very gates of his castle, and the laughter was stilled as he caught the herald's message.

No vassal was there of all the great House of Burgundy who escaped the stern call and none was there who dared set it at naught. For the last time, Monseigneur the Duke, despite his threescore years and ten, was to take the field. Yet now, it was no longer the

King of France to whom he opposed himself, but the rebellious and brawling people of Liège and Dinant, who had dared set his will at defiance. That Louis XI.'s hands were fully occupied with his greedy designs upon Normandy gave Monseigneur the freer scope for the terrible revenge he meditated, for well did he know that the king would never abandon his greater aim to succour the Liègeoise. Therefore, over every road leading from Bruges sped the galloping heralds bearing their dread summons to arms. No commonplace foray had Monseigneur in mind, but a bitter, ruthless vengeance; and that none might fail to understand, these riders bore aloft in one hand a blazing torch, in the other a naked sword—fit omens of what was to follow.

And what offence had so enraged Monseigneur the Duke; what insolent act had the Liègeoise committed which could so fearfully rouse his wrath? Small reason and less safety would there have been in asking such question of any Burgundian. If Monseigneur had been pleased to obtain the appointment of his nephew, Louis de Bourbon, as Bishop of Liège, whose affair was that but his own and the Pope's? If the new bishop had soon proved himself a profligate, and had levied extortionate tribute upon the people, was that any plea for their rising in revolt and driving him from their midst? Nay, rather were the bishop's faults due to his unripe years—since he had not yet attained a score, and were to be passed over as something transient. What Monseigneur had ordained must be endured; so argued the men of Burgundy.

Yet, strangely enough, the Liègeoise had failed to see the matter in the same light; had refused to submit to being plundered of their savings for the profit of the bishop's courtesans; and when warned by the duke, had

hurled defiance back at him for answer. In all the province, but one town, Bouvignes, had remained loyal to Monseigneur, and, conversely, none had gone further in opposing him than the town of Dinant on the opposite bank of the Meuse. Hence, in the nature of things, an interurban warfare had sprung up between the people of these two towns, and Bouvignes, getting the worst of the encounter, had appealed to Monseigneur for aid.

The bishop had fled to Huy, taking with him his dissolute and fearful followers, but not ere his brief rule had thrown Liège into a state of unrestrained lawlessness. Thousands, ruined by his excesses, had forsaken their homes and now roamed the vast forest of Ardennes, living the lives of outlaws and balking at no crime which desperate men and women may contrive. Companions of the Green Tent they called themselves, and woe to any traveller who fell within their clutches.

Of all these bands, one there was which was most dreaded. It ranged over the hills about Dinant, whence most of its members had come, pouncing upon any who were so uninformed as to choose that route through the forest, and warring with its neighbouring bands, though few of the latter had any chance in such meeting. Strange to say, the leader of this coterie of outlaws was said to be a woman calling herself Marcelle the Mad; yet, in truth, there was little of the woman showing in the doings of her company. But above all other qualifications in a follower, she was held to rate hatred of the House of Burgundy, and certain it was that many a Burgundian disappeared into that part of the forest where she held sway, never to return.

Thus it was that at last the duke roused to action. Bitterly he railed at the Companions of the Green Tent; more bitterly he ranted against this Marcelle the Mad;

but most bitterly of all did he swear dire vengeance upon the town of Dinant, the very breeding-nest of the general revolt.

Yet, now that the call had gone forth, Monseigneur, enfeebled by age, found that his strength was unequal to taking full charge of operations. Fortunately, in his own son, the Count de Charolais, he had a ready and trusted lieutenant, and to him did he confide the mustering of the host which was to crush all sedition in short order. Monseigneur would follow by slow stages as his state permitted, but would be present at the final moment. To Count Charles should be the honour of the immediate command.

The household—such members of it as Monseigneur or Count Charles selected—repaired at once to Namur, whither the forces were to report. Nor were these slow in flocking to the standard.

Within a week came my Lord d'Humbercourt and, fairly treading upon his heels, my Lords Contay and Ravestein. From Picardy came its governor, Philip de Crevecoeur, and with him the Marshal of Burgundy and many more whose loyalty to Monseigneur was too well known to be questioned. But greater than all these was the Count de St. Pol, Constable of France, and of his unswerving allegiance there might be some doubt, since one day he truckled to the king and the next fawned upon the Burgundian faction. Even he, however, dared not disregard the summons, and though naturally he might not bring the king's forces which were under his command, he mustered a sufficient body of horse and foot among his own vassals to make a goodly showing. With these warriors came men-at-arms, archers, bombardiers, and foot-soldiers, till the streets of the town, open enough of ordinary, were fairly choked by the armed

hordes pouring through them. By the first day of August the muster was complete, and Count Charles only awaited the arrival of Monseigneur before springing upon his prey.

The roar of laughter that greeted the man's sudden entrance into the room died away as suddenly as it had arisen, for, though he was regarded as the wag of the company, it was plain enough that this time he had no buffoonery in mind.

The Lady Agathe gave a little gasp and drew closer to the Countess de Laubec, and the lackeys, who were in the act of placing lights about the assembly room, paused an instant in their work. Of the others, it was the Lord d'Humbercourt who first found words.

"The devil, Monsieur Vignolles—the constable; has aught happened to him?"

The same thought occurred to all, it seemed, for they crowded round the man eagerly. Nor was this strange, since Hilaire Vignolles was vassal to the Count de St. Pol, and, being his favourite, ever in his company when he stirred abroad. To see him as he now stood before them, capless, his face and apparel grimy with dirt and the sleeve nearly torn from his tunic, was enough to rouse fear for the constable's safety. Moreover, it was well enough known that the Count de St. Pol had others than friends in camp.

For a moment Vignolles might not answer, so blown was he with exertion; then he gasped:

"I—I know naught of the constable, my lord; I—I——"

But here some one proffered him a cup of brandy, and he paused long enough to drain it at a gulp; then continued, as he fell into a chair:

"I have, in truth, been too busy to think of my lord the constable, but, so far as I am aware, he is with Count Charles. I am not on service to-day."

There was a faint touch of his wonted jesting in the tone he used, and a passing flash in his eye that told he was fast recovering his spirits at least. "Busy," indeed, he seemed to have been. As he ended, he lay back upon the arm of the chair so that those nearest saw the red stain upon the material of his torn sleeve.

"You are wounded, Monsieur Vignolles!" exclaimed Philip de Crevecoeur.

"Ay; grievously, my lord," replied Vignolles; "grievously, but not there," he added quickly, as De Crevecoeur would have made examination of his arm. "There, 'tis but the scratch of a cat. 'Tis my heart that has been painfully hit." And he pulled down the frayed ends of his sleeve so that they all saw it was, as he said, but a slight wound, from which the blood had already ceased flowing.

"Enough of your riddles, monsieur, and come to the point!" cried one, the Sieur Giraud d'Orson, a captain of fourscore lances, and much in Count Charles's favour. "Enough men have I seen grievously hit at heart as you say to know you suffer from no such stroke. Out with it, man; see, even the ladies hang upon your words!"

Monsieur Vignolles turned quickly enough, and in an instant was upon his feet, bowing low to the ladies, and favouring them all equally with his smile.

"A thousand pardons for such a sight as I present, mesdames!" he said quickly. "Yet the saints be praised that you are here to judge between the Sieur Giraud and myself! He claims that I suffer no wound at heart;

I swear I do. You shall act as arbiters between us; and so, for my side of it."

"Now, by Our Lady, do you listen to him!" whispered De Contay in the ear of the Sieur d'Orson. "If he weaves not a tale of romance fit to send the ladies into hysterics, ne'er may I think to know the man again."

The Sieur d'Orson contented himself with a shrug of the shoulders in reply, but was clearly of the same opinion. He moved to the side of the Lady Agathe and said something in an undertone, which caused her fair head to go up and a smile to part her lips, as she shot a glance at Monsieur Vignolles. That worthy was, by now, oblivious to all save the impression he had made, and fairly swelled with self-complacency.

"Firstly, you must know that alone this day I have been to Bouvignes," he began grandly, and paused as though challenging contradiction.

He met with none direct, however; only the exchange of significant glances among his hearers. The thing was too impossible to render denial aught than waste of breath, since marauding and cut-throat bands of Companions were as thick as hived bees in all the woods about Bouvignes.

"You are a bold man, Monsieur Vignolles," said De Contay softly; "yet, methinks, excitement has played tricks with your memory. The state of your attire would go to show that you were more successful in trying than in actually entering Bouvignes."

"Yet, I swear to you, I did enter the town, my Lord de Contay. 'Twas on my return I met with misadventure," answered Monsieur Vignolles.

"And what devil possessed you to tempt so speedy an end, monsieur?" asked the Sieur d'Orson. "The way into Bouvignes will be free enough once we have

cleared these freebooters from the hills. Your business must have been of the utmost moment that you must risk the essay now."

"I may not speak of what took me there," replied Monsieur Vignolles, even more grandly. "The—the matter—er—er—a lady's name is concerned, since you press me."

Inasmuch as none had so pressed him, a ripple of laughter ran round the company at his apparent forcing of an imaginary *liaison* upon them.

"Then not a word more of your adventure in the town, Monsieur Vignolles," cried the Lord d'Humbercourt. "Certainly, we would not willingly drag any lady's name into the discourse—at all events, not before others," he added, with a quick glance of amusement at the Lady Agathe and the countess.

"Then I may consider my back turned on Bouvignes since the hour of five this afternoon?" asked Vignolles quickly.

"I think you may," answered the Lord d'Humbercourt, and added *sotto voce*, "since it probably was turned in that direction the entire day."

"I thank you, my lord. Then, as I say, I galloped forth from Bouvignes at five, and, deeming the same route safe which had taken me thither, set spur along it boldly enough. Yet, I had gone little over a half-league when, of a sudden, an arrow flew from the underbrush on my right—you see a part of its course here on my arm—the next instant my mount had swerved and I found myself torn from the saddle and thrown heavily to earth."

"Yet, I'll be sworn, you made good account of yourself, monsieur," said De Contay, with a scarce perceptible droop of one eyelid toward the others.

"Ah, surely, surely you did, Monsieur Vignolles!" breathed the Lady Agathe with such intense earnestness that one must have believed her sincere.

Monsieur Vignolles hesitated for a moment, then, as though casting aside a much-cherished wish, shook his head in all sadness.

"Alas, my lady, would that I might deserve your kind words! All that a worm may do when trodden 'neath a boot, that I did, and squirmed most valiantly till they wrenched my sword free from its sheath and bound me hard and fast. There were five of them, and lusty knaves, forsooth."

General disappointment shone on the faces of his listeners. Was it possible the man was for once speaking seriously?

"And then?" queried the Sieur d'Orson, for the first time seeming to take an interest in the tale.

"And then one of the rogues shouldered me as he might have borne a deer's carcass and made off up the hills with me. Yet I might not see the direction he took, for they had thrown a filthy sack over my head ere taking their weight from me."

"Yet you are sure you went up into the hills?" said De Crevecoeur.

"Ay, my lord; by the man's stumbling and by another's pushing him along from behind," answered Monsieur Vignolles. "Nor was it any great distance I was so carried, else I must have burst something in my head, which hung downward over the knave's back. At length, with a grunt, he threw me on to the ground and drew the sack from my head."

"Thereby exposing nothing," muttered De Contay to d'Humbercourt.

"At first, as you say, my lord, I saw naught," re-

plied Vignolles, having caught a part of De Contay's speech—"naught save the villainous face that was bent over me for a moment as my bonds were severed."

"Ah! Then with a bound you were at his throat, eh?" cried De Crevecoeur.

"On the contrary, my lord, my attention was diverted instantly by the movements of two of the rogues who stood over me with half-drawn bows. There is a fascination about an arrow-point, viewed from the ground in such fashion. However, in another moment, they motioned me to rise, and as I gained my feet, I saw 'twas no handful I had to deal with, but a veritable company—full threescore as ragged rascals as e'er went unhung. Yet not a sound came from them, whereat I greatly marvelled, seeing them thus forming a closed circle about me in this small open space in the forest. Then the ring opened at one side, and the entire band half-wheeled that way, so that for a moment I meditated a dash through the nearest of them."

"Now we are come to the romance," whispered De Contay.

"Nay, my lord; it is the truth the man is telling. He is living over something again, doubt it not," answered the Sieur d'Orson, and moved closer to Monsieur Vignolles, saying quietly:

"And through that parting in the ranks there came, Monsieur Vignolles——?"

"Ay, through that break in the circle strode the leader of this thieving band, and at the sight I was rooted to the ground, for what a figure to head such a mob of cut-throats. In stature a full hand beneath me" (Monsieur Vignolles was short and sensitive thereon), "a mass of hair, black as the raven's wing, falling upon the shoulders from beneath a cap of green velvet—a

spray of pine twig stuck therein in place of a feather—eyes of hazel that seemed to pierce through my own. This much I caught as she came toward me."

"She!"

The exclamation was general.

Monsieur Vignolles well knew how to work up his sensation, and, having attained it, enjoyed it to the full. Therefore, he made some pretence of arranging his tattered dress before replying.

"Did I not say 'twas a woman? 'Twas an oversight, then. Ay, 'twas a woman, in truth, or, rather, a girl, since I'll be sworn, scarce a score years have weighed upon her."

"Another lady concerned in Monsieur Vignolles's tale, and, like the one at Bouvignes, he probably chooses to shield her name as well," cried d'Humbercourt; but there was small response to his jibe, save a titter from those who invariably appreciate everything falling from exalted lips. The company in general were by this time fairly convinced that the narrative was genuine, and had small patience for interruptions.

"Nay, my Lord d'Humbercourt, I make no attempt to conceal the identity of this lady; but pray let me proceed," answered Vignolles. "As I have said, I noted what I have already told you as she came toward me; also that her bodice and kirtle were of the same tree-green with her cap, and that her legs and feet from the knees were wound in thongs of deerskin. You may deem me the fool, messieurs—as indeed some of you will—but you may believe me in this, ne'er have I seen such a beauteous creature as this renegade wench. The tread of a deer, as you draw within bow-shot, and it raises its head instinctive of danger, may nearest suffice to show her carriage. Straight and fearless, she

came to take her place before me, and for an instant stood looking me in the eyes. Then, with a gesture in which there was much of grace, turned to those who so had brought me to that plight.

"'You have done well, comrades. No hair of the fool's head has been harmed?' (I but repeat the words she used.) 'His purse, I see, he still wears; but the contents——'

"'If there be any, such are there still, Marcelle,' answered the one who had borne me o'er his back.

"My hand had flown to my purse at her words.

"'I see all is well. Monsieur still has his store to protect,' said the girl. 'You will relieve him of the burden, Tite,' whereat the knave tore my purse from me and handed it over to her ere I knew or realised his object. Also some words passed between them which I heard not.

"'We shall be able to put it to better uses than you could by any possible chance, monsieur,' said the girl, and quickly fell to counting the amount, which done, she again turned upon me.

"'You come opportunely, monsieur,' she said; 'since for some days I have been on the watch for a suitable messenger. From the device on your tunic, I divine that you are vassal to the Count de St. Pol, and, consequently, of that army which the Count de Charolais is now mustering yonder at Namur.'

"'I wear no false colours,' I answered sourly enough.

"''Tis as well that it is so, monsieur, else perchance, having no use for you myself, my comrades might find one,' she answered quickly, but scarce raising her voice. 'Yet, since I have employment for you, you need have no fear. You have but to take a message to the Count de

Charolais—a message which, perchance, may cause you some embarrassment in delivering, but such is of small moment compared to what you will gain by complying—your life, I mean.'

"'A message to Count Charles!' I exclaimed. 'In the name of all the saints, what message——?'

"'That you shall know, monsieur, when you have sworn to deliver it.'

"'And if I will not?' I said.

"'Then we shall find another more tractable,' she replied, and, indeed, there was no mercy in the look she gave me; also I noted an uneasy movement and a surging toward me of the circle.

"My head dropped under her gaze, and methought that, in truth, the game lay between accepting her commission and dancing on air for a few moments under one of the surrounding pines.

"'You are a fool,' she said shortly, 'for no one, save a fool, would have attempted the ride from Namur to Bouvignes to-day. That you passed freely, you may thank me, for up to the very walls a score of bows were bent upon you awaiting my word. The device upon your tunic told me, however, that you would return. Yet I would know what brought you hither, monsieur. You have searched him, Tite?'

"'Your orders were——'

"'Then search him now.' And at that the rogue again would have laid hands upon me, save that I cried:

"'Enough—enough! I yield and will take such message as you have to give me. What took me to Bouvignes was—but stay—if there be any among your company from Bouvignes, let him come where I may speak into his ear.'

"And as it chanced, there was one from that town,

and, he coming forward sullenly enough, I did give him such particulars of names and streets as convinced him of the honesty of my visit. For a moment afterward he conversed apart with the girl, Marcelle, and I credit him with a proper account of me, for she turned and said:

"'Tis well, monsieur; but though you shall be spared a search, you shall swear to carry out your compact.'

"And with that she did swear me by all the saints, by St. Hubert, by Our Lady, and by the honour of my mother to bear the word she gave me straight and truly to Count Charles; then went on:

"'Then listen, Monsieur Vignolles——'

"'So even my name is known to you,' I cried.

"'Tis scrawled 'neath your saddle-flap, so Tite has told me,' she answered drily. 'And now for the message to the Count de Charolais. Tell him we have heard of his threats against the Companions of the Green Tent, and if he would have his answer soon, bid him have regard for what shall pass over the walls of Bouvignes this very night. Such is the word I send him—I, Marcelle the Mad.'"

"'Marcelle the Mad!'" cried the company.

"Ay, for 'twas into none other's hands I had fallen," answered Monsieur Vignolles; "but, by my faith, the very woodland breeze might have knocked me over, for methought this mad woman some ill-favoured wench of twoscore or thereabout. There were other women on the outside of the circle, any one of whom I would have picked as more likely to be Marcelle."

"Go on with your tale, monsieur," said the Sieur Giraud. "What answer made you?"

"'If that be all, I will take the message,' I said,

'though 'tis naught but life could tempt me thereto, for methinks you speak of some devil's work that will scarce add to Count Charles's pleasure.'

"'You presume on the need I have of you to take such tone, monsieur,' she said. 'Have a care lest you go too far!'

"At the look in her eyes I held my tongue.

"'There is yet one other matter,' continued the girl, drawing a folded parchment from her bosom. 'This letter was taken from one of Count Charles's men a few days ago by my orders. Even then I was seeking the messenger I have found in you, Monsieur Vignolles; but less fortunate than you, he was slain in the encounter that ensued on his seizure. I pray you give this letter to the one to whom it is addressed. My compliments also to Count Charles and the assurance that I do not meddle with *amours* at his court, whatever else he may hold against me.'

"I took the letter she proffered me, and, in truth, the writing gave me a start, since I knew it as well as my own.

"'You present your compliments,' I said, and laughed. 'The compliments of the mad woman of the Ardennes to the Count de Charolais. He will be flattered, I'll be sworn.'

"For a moment her dark brows grew into a straight line, and the mutter from the band grew loud in my ears. Then she laughed; but the laugh was harsh as she waved them back.

"'His horse!' she cried, and one of the band brought the beast to where I stood quickly enough, having kept it behind the screen of trees directly on my right. Then she went on:

"'Great as is Count Charles at Namur, you forget,

monsieur, that in these hills I am even greater for the moment. But, fool though you are, you shall go. Bid Count Charles remember well who sends him this word. Comrades, that this dolt may not forget ere he reaches Namur—my name!'

"With one accord they tore off their caps and shouted, 'Marcelle the Mad!'

"'And a round of cheers for the Companions of the Green Tent!' she added, smiling upon them. And the very leaves were set rocking by the uproar that followed. In truth, the love of the motley crew for this girl was plain enough.

"And then, on a sign from her, they returned my sword. I was again blinded by the sack, and climbed into the saddle. My two arms were held by a rogue on either side, while a third led my horse down, down windingly till I was turned into a path and loose at the same moment. When I had freed my eyes I was alone, and—here I am."

He paused and wiped the moisture from his brow; then drew a crumpled parchment from his jerkin and spread it out.

The Sieur d'Orson gave a start and seemed about to snatch it from him; then, with a baffled look, stood shifting from one foot to the other.

Monsieur Vignolles continued.

"My first duty is to Count Charles, yet, since we are all so met here, this letter may take precedence."

He turned slowly and extended his hand to the Lady Agathe.

"It bears your name, my lady," he said. "Let me deliver it, then, to you, as I was sworn."

"Stay, monsieur!"

As on one pivot, the whole company turned, and

there in the open doorway stood Count Charles himself and behind him the Constable of France. In an instant all had fallen back, as the count strode rapidly forward.

"Your tale has been of much import, Monsieur Vignolles," he snapped. "At least the latter half which I caught, and it makes me curious to see that letter."

So saying, he took it from Monsieur Vignolles' trembling hand, as the latter bowed confusedly.

"As for the verbal message, monsieur, you need not repeat it," he said shortly, as he broke the seal of the parchment. "You have truly had quite an adventure; I shall not forget the name—Marcelle the Mad. Ha, we shall see; we shall see and note as well what does pass over the walls of Bouvignes this night."

With that he set himself to read, and, as he read, his face darkened angrily. When ended, he crushed the letter in his great fist.

"The Sieur d'Orson!" he cried.

He, so called, stepped forward.

"So 'tis thus you disobey me, sir! What I have ordered in Bruges seems, then, of no avail. When was this letter written?"

"A week ago, my lord count," replied the Sieur d'Orson.

"When my Lady Agathe was *en route* hither, then? And you dared address yourself to her after what I had commanded!"

The count's rage was fearful to behold, and the Lady Agathe shrunk before the look he threw her.

"I have no excuse, my lord, unless an honest attachment be such," said the Sieur d'Orson quietly; "yet, before the court, my lady's name——"

"Before the court, forsooth!" cried the count. "And

have I not forbid enough in private your raising your eyes to my Lady Agathe? Let us, then, make it as public as possible. Know, once for all, that the hand of my Lady Agathe is for another than one I have raised from the ranks. Have I not, then, done enough to reward you, sir, for the service you did me at Montlhery?"

"Speak not of that, my lord count," said d'Orson earnestly. He had saved the count's life in that battle.

"Nor will I again do so, Sieur Giraud d'Orson!" roared the count. "Moreover, know once more and for all time, my will is to be obeyed. The Lady Agathe weds on her return to Bruges. The constable and I have so arranged it."

"On my return to Bruges!" gasped the Lady Agathe.

"I have said it. And now let the ladies retire."

He waved his hand imperiously, and, thoroughly cowed by his manner, the ladies withdrew with such trembling ceremony as they might muster.

"As for you, Sieur Giraud, look not above your position, which is good enough, considering what you sprang from," he added harshly, then turned to Monsieur Vignolles:

"Curiously enough, monsieur, I may not vent my wrath upon you, since the constable and I have just made arrangements for your happiness, as well as that of the Lady Agathe, and I would not ring a discordant note."

The Sieur Giraud made a step forward.

"You mean, my lord——"

"I mean that, on my return to Bruges, a marriage will take place between the Lady Agathe de Laval of Dauphiné, my ward, and Monsieur le Comte de Nanteuil, now Monsieur Vignolles—a fitting union of rank

and fortune. My lord the constable is your good friend, Monsieur Vignolles."

And noting the smug smile of satisfaction upon the constable's face, there were many present who saw through his aim, for the Lady Agathe of Dauphiné would be a power in his hands through her estates and household.

"Yet, my lord, I may not—I am not, as you say—" began Monsieur Vignolles in bewilderment.

"Count de Nanteuil, you would say?" replied Count Charles. "No, but my lord the constable will attend to that once we have done with these Liègeoise fools. And now, my lords and messieurs, to see what passes over the walls of Bouvignes this night. Sieur Giraud, do you take a few lances and scour the country, that we may know soon, and I promise you such advancement as will atone for your disappointment if you bring me, living or dead, the body of this Marcelle the Mad."

CHAPTER II

WHAT THE CONSTABLE HEARD

IN the growing dawn the river mist hung heavy over the sleeping town as the Sieur Giraud led his men toward the gate. The pace he made was but a slow one, and his head was bent forward over his pommel so that great drops of moisture from his visor dripped occasionally upon the velvet covering of his brigantine. With the score following him, he had been in the saddle since Count Charles had ordered him forth the night before, and one might have expected a faster pace now that relief was in sight and the night's work at an end.

By the Sieur Giraud's side rode another shorter and altogether smaller figure, and this one, too, kept taut rein on the mount he bestrode. He, as well, disdained not a close-fitting coat of mail. Where any tree might hide a lurking shadow with drawn bow, such was only the part of discretion, and well these men knew this Ardennes Forest, whence they were returning. At length he spoke, this smaller of the two, after raising his head and darting a searching look at his companion.

"Last night I believed my own tale had spelled my ruin, despite anything the constable might do, Sieur Giraud; yet methinks what you have for Count Charles's ear—well, the saints are kind in sending it should be you who bears him such report."

The Sieur Giraud raised not his gaze at the words, and seemed so lost in thought that Monsieur Vignolles

—for it was none other—shrugged his shoulders and again settled down in the saddle. Even as he did so, however, the Sieur Giraud spoke in reply.

"You are gifted, Monsieur Vignolles, in seeing aught of the saints' favour in my selection."

"Gifted forsooth, Sieur Giraud; 'tis but common sense. Did another carry such news to Count Charles, even though 'tis no fault of the messenger, picture the result. You know the man ne'er pauses to think once his wrath is roused. Since the thing now has to be done, I say again, 'tis well it is his favourite on whom the duty falls."

This time the Sieur Giraud's head rose quickly.

"Bah! Speak not of favourites, monsieur. Have you so soon forgot Count Charles's tirade against me?"

"The devil! No, that I have not, since that matter also concerns me, yet I'll be sworn 'twas but a passing outburst brought on by the overhearing of my narrative. The Count de Charolais forgets not such service as you have rendered him, Sieur Giraud."

"Nor has he forgotten it, as, indeed, he threw in my face. From plain man-at-arms I am become the Sieur Giraud d'Orson, with eighty lances for command. No, Monsieur Vignolles; my lord reckons the score evened between us."

"Yet they tell me that at Montlhery you beat off a body of the king's foot who had laid hands on Count Charles and wellnigh dragged him to earth."

"'Twas small enough service, monsieur," replied the Sieur Giraud, as if the memory of it was distasteful; "and my lord himself would have accounted for them, thrust through the neck though he was. That Jean Cadet and myself came up at the moment was but hastening the affair."

Monsieur Vignolles laughed shortly.

"There was no doubt among those present that the affair was so hastened, Sieur Giraud."

"Even so, I tell you the debt has been paid in full to my lord's way of thinking, and, after last night, I would that some other brought him this report. I would as well that you, Monsieur Vignolles, had ne'er let the swish of a kirtle lead you to Bouvignes yesterday. From that folly has come this present plight," said the Sieur Giraud.

"Ay, therein lies the plight of both of us, Sieur Giraud."

The latter turned in the saddle and looked curiously at the other before replying.

"Your pardon; but I see not in what your plight consists. It occurs to me that, thanks to my lord the constable, your position leaves little to be desired, Monsieur le Comte de Nanteuil—that is to be."

The words were uttered half-mockingly, half-bitterly, but Monsieur Vignolles seemed not to heed that.

"Think not I object to the advancement, Sieur Giraud, since my lord the constable still has enough influence with the king to procure it for me. Methinks the rank would not sit ill upon me," he said, and for a moment straightened in the saddle with so much of loftiness that his companion smiled. "No, 'tis not that, but the other arrangement that weighs heavy upon me."

The Sieur Giraud brought his horse to almost a full stop.

"You mean the Lady Agathe, monsieur?" he said, in a strained voice.

"Whom else?" replied Monsieur Vignolles, his own tone lowering lest the men behind should catch his words. "With all thanks to my lord, the Count de St.

Pol, I would that he had left out that clause in making his kind dispositions for me."

The Sieur Giraud wondered if the constable's efforts had been so disinterested as Monsieur Vignolles believed. With the wealth of the Lady Agathe transferred to his own vassal, how strengthened would be his hand! Moreover, it was generally believed that the constable's exchequer was at a low ebb. This thought, however, was but fleeting. What was incomprehensible to the Sieur Giraud was that this man could repel, and repel so lightly, such a match as had been arranged. At length he found voice.

"And yet, Monsieur Vignolles, you are not blind to the allurements of the sex; for instance, the lady of Bouvignes, whose name you so nobly shielded——"

"I deny it not," replied Monsieur Vignolles quickly, and ignoring the reference. "By my faith, what man at five-and-a-score years is so blind. There is such charm about the whole sex that I should miss too much were I shackled to any one."

"Yet the Lady Agathe is very beautiful," mused the Sieur Giraud.

"Granted; so beautiful that to profane such loveliness by overindulgence were sacrilege itself," came the ready reply.

"She is accomplished beyond most women, and of gentle birth."

"Which but serves to render her proud and of a haughtiness that pleases me but little. Saints! Did you note her look at me when Count Charles made known the arrangement, Sieur Giraud? 'Twas the look one bestows on a dog."

"Since beauty nor birth makes no appeal to you, monsieur, perchance riches will. The Lady Agathe had

from her father one of the greatest fiefs in all Dauphiné," said the Sieur Giraud.

"Ah, Sieur Giraud, that is another matter—riches. You are right. I am not disposed to speak ill of them—I, who am dependent upon what the constable may throw me from his store," answered Monsieur Vignolles. "Ay, did the Lady Agathe truly wish to buy me outright, perchance I might weaken; but I'll be sworn that were I in a booth at the market marked one *denier*, she'd laugh at the price. Methinks she might give that sum for you, Sieur Giraud."

"A thousand thanks, Monsieur Vignolles," replied the latter.

"'Tis plain enough you have won favour in her eyes," continued Monsieur Vignolles; "and from what Count Charles said, you have paid her some attention."

"So much that now I am even forbid speech with her, as you know," was the grim reply.

For a moment they rode on in silence, then Monsieur Vignolles turned and looked earnestly in the other's face.

"Does it, then, matter so much, Sieur Giraud?" he asked quietly.

The Sieur Giraud raised his clenched fist, but as quickly lowered it.

"Matter so much? Why, man, it's——"

"Your pardon, Sieur Giraud. I am not of the court, and knew not how far the affair had progressed. You will cherish no ill-will toward me in the matter? As I have said, any alliance is distasteful to me, and I would keep my affections unfettered."

By now the cavalcade had come to the gate, and while the barrier was being let down, the Sieur Giraud seemed to meditate on the other's words; then said suddenly:

"I own, monsieur, that I have taken small pleasure in your company this night; nor, in truth, do I understand even now why you joined me."

"I came by my lord the constable's orders, Sieur Giraud," answered Monsieur Vignolles in a low tone. "By my faith, I know not the why or wherefore, yet methinks my lord doth cherish some distrust of you."

"Say, rather, would lay some trap for me, monsieur," was the answer. "Until the Count de St. Pol came to Bruges a month ago, my suit was never questioned by Count Charles. Yet I see not the reason in his sending you to play the spy upon me, now that all is settled."

Monsieur Vignolles straightened at the brand so put upon him, and a gleam of anger flashed in his dark eyes.

"The Count de St. Pol is my lord and master, Sieur Giraud d'Orson," he said coldly. "It is not for me to question his affairs. Yet would I abjure allegiance to any man who would set me to play the spy—as you term it—upon another of the same party. If I have played such part, it has been unwittingly, and I will not take the word from you or any other. In an hour's time, shall we say, here at the gates; the light will then be better and——"

"Monsieur Vignolles, you are hasty; yet, in truth, 'tis a haste I much admire!" broke in the Sieur Giraud, and for the first time his tone was warm. "I accused you not of being the spy, save unwittingly, as you say; and that much I do adhere to. Methinks we are beyond our depth in searching a reason for your being sent on this errand. You asked me if I bore you any ill-will, monsieur. Believe me, I do now esteem you above playing aught than a fair game."

Monsieur Vignolles's anger had departed at the words.

"And, as well, Sieur Giraud, you know how detestable any union such as planned would be for me," he said.

The Sieur Giraud nodded.

"Yet you will wed the Lady Agathe," he answered with decision.

"I suppose I shall," said Monsieur Vignolles, and shook his head dubiously.

And with that, the gates being opened, they clattered through them and separated, the men going to stable the horses, Monsieur Vignolles to seek such rest as he might gain ere the constable's rising, and the Sieur Giraud to deliver his report to Count Charles de Charolais.

As he mounted the steps of the great house which Count Charles had made his quarters, the *reveille* trumpets sent their call through the streets, and he paused for a moment ere entering past the heavy-eyed archer on guard.

From the doors of the houses where they were billeted came sleepy figures in answer to the call. Beneath the camp-wagons lining the roads, strange, huddled bundles suddenly became alive and yielded each a man, whose first thought on rising was to stretch himself lazily, and whose second was to kick some still sleeping mate into action. Men seemed to spring from the very ground and rapidly formed shifting groups for the morning's muster, affording a spectacle of an apparently inextricable tangle of men-at-arms, arquebusiers, *constilliers* or light horse, pages, archers, and foot-soldiers.

Yet the disorder was apparent, not real. Lances composed of eight soldiers fell together by fives to form messes; these messes by fours joined their respective squadron letters, and these squadrons, again by fours,

melted each into its proper company. It was the Sieur Giraud's own company that so was mustered before his gaze, and he took some pride as he noted the ease with which 'twas done. The muster over, the groups dissolved as quickly. Two drunken roisterers, dragged past by some men of the provost-marshal's guard, came in for much boisterous comment and raillery from the others. Poor devils! Already they were fairly sobered by the thought of the score of lashes which awaited them, for Count Charles had small mercy on those guilty of excesses.

The Sieur Giraud turned abruptly from the moving scene and entered the house.

To reach Count Charles's quarters, he must needs traverse a long corridor, but he had made scarce half the distance when he heard his name called, and pivoted on his heel at the voice.

Coming swiftly toward him from the other side of the hallway was the Lady Agathe, and behind her, at a slower pace, the Countess de Laubec.

"My lady—at this hour!" was all he could find words for as she came before him.

"Ah, what matters the hour?" she cried, and he saw that her eyes were red with much weeping, and that she trembled while striving to conceal her agitation. "Sieur Giraud, I—I know not to whom else I may turn in my extremity. For hours I have been watching from above for your return. Ask Madame la Comtesse if it be not so. I beg of you grant me a few moments' discourse."

The Sieur Giraud shot a glance up and down the corridor. Save for the sentries, they were alone; but he had in mind Count Charles's warning, and, though 'twas by none of his doing, knew full well what this

meeting would mean for him did it reach the count's knowledge. Yet there was a note in the Lady Agathe's voice, a note of distress, of anguish, that held him to the spot.

"My Lady Agathe, willingly would I not only grant but accept as the most priceless boon any discourse you might accord me," he said. "Yet, I have my duty to my lord, and, moreover, now do hasten to him with a report which he must await with some impatience."

"I know, I know!" she exclaimed. "Nor would I be the one to jeopardize your position with my lord. God knows, I fought against this very coming to you; but there was no other course open. Ah, Sieur Giraud, surely your report may wait long enough for you to hear me!"

There was such trouble in her tone that he was put to it to resist the appeal, and turned his gaze from hers as he made answer:

"Nay, my Lady Agathe; I am already in enough disfavour. Whate'er a man might do to serve you, that would I do; methinks you are aware of that. But this matter, save it be one of life and death, which I do not credit, cannot take precedence of my duty to my lord count. Yet I will brave much to be of counsel or assistance to you, my lady; and once I have seen my lord, I am at your service, cost what it may."

The loud tramp of approaching footsteps came to their ears as he ended, and the Sieur Giraud started at the sound. It was, of course, naught but the relieving guard coming on duty, yet the officer in charge must not see the ladies here in converse with him at this hour. He turned hurriedly, and his hand fell upon the latch of the door behind him. As he knew, it was but an anteroom used by day for those who waited an audience of

Count Charles. He swung the door open, and a look showed him that 'twas empty.

"For a moment till the guard be past!" he cried sharply, and fairly thrust the ladies within. As he closed the door softly the captain of the guard, one Chaubran, turned into the corridor with a file of men at his heels. He saluted the Sieur Giraud as he came abreast.

"You are early, Sieur Giraud," he said cheerily, "or late, whiche'er it may be. Have you brought as an offering that witch of the Ardennes?"

And then the Sieur Giraud remembered that the man had been present in the assembly room the night previous, and thanked his fate that he had not seen the Lady Agathe.

"No, monsieur; the witch is still at large," he answered with a laugh. "Yet I would see my lord count at once."

"Impossible, Sieur Giraud," replied Chaubran shortly. "He was engaged with my lord the constable till the small hours, and his orders are peremptory for quiet this morning. Not for the King of France himself would I rouse him."

"There you would err on the wrong side," said the Sieur Giraud, thinking of the joy 'twould give Count Charles just then to lay hands on the king.

"I take no chances," replied Chaubran. "In any case, since you have not the wench, methinks your affair may scarce suffer by delay."

And with that he marched on with his men, all of them treading softly enough as they came opposite the count's apartments.

The Sieur Giraud turned again to the door behind him. Since he was so debarred from Count Charles,

he would hear what the Lady Agathe had to say to him, what it was which had so greatly upset her calm. Ne'er would he find a moment with less chance of discovery by the count, and, besides, his heart yearned to give the Lady Agathe comfort, and was beating faster than mere sympathy would warrant. He pushed the door open and stepped within quickly.

Fatal eagerness; unpardonable neglect!

Had he paused for a last reassuring look, ne'er would he have entered, for he would have seen the tall figure that had stopped suddenly at the far end of the corridor, and was watching his movements with all closeness. But the door closed as quickly behind him. The watching figure delayed for a word with a sentry, whose talk seemed pleasing from its reflection in his face. Then, on silent feet, the figure stole to the door.

The Lady Agathe might now tell her tale; the door was but thin, and none boasted keener hearing than Louis de Luxembourg, Constable of France.

Meanwhile the Sieur Giraud had stepped quickly to where the Lady Agathe and the Countess de Laubec sat huddled together upon the great window-seat. The former rose with a sharp cry, but the Sieur Giraud spoke quickly before some half-formed words had left her lips.

"My lady, it seems that I may not have audience of my lord count at once. I pray you, therefore, inform me wherein I may be of service to you, yet as briefly as may be, since at any moment I—we may be interrupted."

A pale ray of the early sun fell athwart the Lady Agathe's face, accentuating the deep shadows beneath her blue eyes and the look of worry and fatigue that she wore. Yet the lines that were so apparent on the features of the countess after her night's vigil were ab-

sent from the Lady Agathe's. Youth—such youth as hers—has its privileges, and the Sieur Giraud swore to himself that ne'er had he seen her so beautiful. Save for the presence of the older woman, he would have taken her hand in his own instinctively.

"Ah, Sieur Giraud, something kept telling me I might count on your fidelity," she said, and there was a real gladness in her voice. "Yes, yes; I shall be as brief as I may. Listen! Last night, after you had gone —an hour or more it must have been—a page brought me word to attend immediately upon my lord count. We had none of us retired after such excitement as we had endured, and in fear and trembling I hastened to obey the summons. Judge of my surprise when, on being ushered into my lord's presence, I found that the Count de St. Pol was also closeted with him."

"The constable!" exclaimed her listener.

"None other, and evidently the cause of my summons, if I might know from his satisfied expression. His look gave me a courage I had not felt before, and I turned with something of spirit to meet my lord's harsh words; for such I fully expected, after his earlier outburst. Yet they were not forthcoming, and he spoke to me as gently as though I had been his own child. Oh, ask me not to repeat all that he said! Yet briefly, 'twas how he and the constable had had further discourse regarding my disposal. Disposal; ay, that's what he called it! That the constable had persuaded him that 'twere better the ladies of the court left Namur. The army would move ere long, and it would be safer in Bruges."

"Bruges! So you are to return to Bruges!" exclaimed the Sieur Giraud.

"In two days' time after the arrival of Monseigneur the Duke, so it has been arranged," she answered. "And once there, what escape will there be for me from this marriage. Ah! Can you not see, Sieur Giraud? It is no concern for our safety, but merely the Count de St. Pol's desire to—to——"

"To eliminate me from the game he plays," cut in the Sieur Giraud. "Ay, my lady, that is plain enough; yet methinks my lord's commands to me should have guaranteed that."

"And so I did testify; so I did say. Ah, what did I not speak to those two! Did I not swear that rather would I lie dead than be wedded to this man, whether he were plain Monsieur Vignolles or Monsieur le Comte de Nanteuil, which my lord constable would have him created. Ay, and on my knees did I beg Count Charles to release me from a betrothal so hateful."

"Monsieur Vignolles has much to commend him, my lady. I have made discovery of that," said the Sieur Giraud, a grim smile fleeting over his features for a moment at the thought of how mutually repellent this arrangement was.

The Lady Agathe looked at him a moment in surprise, then continued:

"I ne'er have heard you so speak of him before, Sieur Giraud. I have known the man but a fortnight—have, indeed, scarce addressed a word to him; and yet they would force me to such a marriage. I will have none of it; that I swear to you."

"My lord refused you the release you craved?" asked the Sieur Giraud gently.

"With all decision, since my lord the constable turns him to his own will at pleasure. Yet I denied that there —there was aught between us—between you and me,

Sieur Giraud. It is not seemly that I so should tell you this, but neither is it a time to throw too great a strain on modesty. For answer they both laughed, but the constable the loudest, and my lord count handed me the letter which the mad woman of the hills took from your messenger."

"You read it, my lady!" exclaimed the Sieur Giraud, uneasy despite his joy at the thought.

The Lady Agathe's head fell for a moment, and a wave of colour swept aside the pallor of her cheek.

"I read it, Sieur Giraud—read it while they watched me with much complacency. You—you were mad to write such things," she answered brokenly.

"Ay, my lady, I was mad. Mad as I always have been since first you came to court; mad as I am now that you stand here before me——"

She checked him sharply.

"I may not—not listen—now," she said. "Your letter breathed a loyalty, Sieur Giraud, that I would test to the utmost."

Her manner had changed, and she now spoke with all the positiveness of a woman.

"I will not marry this Monsieur Vignolles; I will not be dragged to Bruges at the behest of the Count de St. Pol. Am I, then, a child to be driven against my will? Ha! They should soon know, were my dear father alive! None stood in greater favour with Count Charles than he."

"Yet my lord count would force this match upon you, my Lady Agathe," said the Sieur Giraud.

"Because 'tis the constable's will o'erriding his own," she answered in all anger. "Yet shall it not avail them, for this day I return to Dauphiné. And you shall aid me, Sieur Giraud."

He started and looked at her to see if she, in truth, spoke seriously. Her expression left him in no doubt.

"Dauphiné, Dauphiné, my lady!" he exclaimed.

"Ay, Dauphiné, where at least I shall be at home and mistress of myself, Sieur Giraud," she replied. "Would that I had never dreamed of the splendours of this court and been content with what I had. But that is now ended. To-day I again become free, if you will help me."

"Much would I do for you, my lady, but——"

"There were no 'buts' in the letter I read, Sieur Giraud," she said, and for a moment her eyes met his.

"Yet were the thing possible, my lady—" he said hesitatingly. "But no, 'tis madness to dream of it, to escape unnoticed from such an armed town as this one."

"'Tis the very fact that it is an armed town that renders the task the easier," she said. "To-day—this morning, at the hour of ten, my lord reviews the army on the plain by the river; that you know. The town will therefore be stripped of soldiers."

The Sieur Giraud nodded, and she went on rapidly:

"Count Charles, the constable, and every officer and man available will be in the field."

"Including myself, my lady," he said in a puzzled tone.

"Wherein will lie your freedom from suspicion, Sieur Giraud. Throughout this long night have I conjured up this plan, and, believe me, 'twill succeed," she made answer. "'Tis not much I have to ask of you—not the half your letter would warrant, yet am I lost without your support. Five horses must I have for myself and those who go with me. By the half hour before ten these must be ready, saddled, and awaiting one whom I shall send for them."

Light was beginning to dawn on the Sieur Giraud.

"And you would have me procure these mounts, my Lady Agathe?" he said slowly.

"No other course remains me but to ask it of you," she answered. "That I am now watched I know only too well. My own horses are stabled with those of my lord, and I dare not call for them without his knowledge. Ah, Sieur Giraud, what is it I ask—what are five horses? Easily enough you may replace the ones taken from your own company by seizing others. Oh! I care not how you do it; but surely you will not deny me this little I demand."

But the Sieur Giraud shook his head gloomily.

"The matter of the horses, perchance, might be easily managed," he said; "yet would you try to reach Dauphiné with but four as an escort? Who are the four?"

"Madame la Comtesse here——"

"And one of the four a woman!" he muttered.

"And three stout bowmen who bore me company when I came north," she said, heedless of his interruption. "'Tis to one of these, Jean Bonnot, I would have you deliver over the horses. All who could or would stop me will be afield; the sentries at the gates will scarce stop the Lady Agathe and escort from riding forth to witness the review, and by noon, when you return, we shall be leagues away."

She was in deadly earnest, and her eyes burned on his as he met their gaze. Truly, this projected marriage was even more distasteful to the Lady Agathe than to Monsieur Vignolles, and as he realised the fullness of this, the heart of the Sieur Giraud bounded within him.

Why should he not do as she asked? There was small risk in the act. Spare horses there were in plenty

in his own company, and he could replace those taken with others that he would buy outright from the townspeople. As for the journey to Dauphiné, the country was quiet enough once they should be clear of this turbulent district, and he dismissed his first fears in that regard. Was he, then, to be an idle spectator of the hounding of this lady into a loathsome marriage?

The Lady Agathe's small foot was tapping the floor impatiently.

"My lady, I accept the charge," he said slowly. "The mounts shall be ready at the half hour before ten. A man I may trust will hold them at your disposal where the street just behind this house meets the cliff. 'Tis some hundred paces from here, but the distance will render it the more secure from notice. I pray you send your man Bonnot there on the moment. God grant that you may get safely away!"

A great sigh of mingled gladness and relief escaped her, and instinctively she put out her hand. The Sieur Giraud sank to his knee and for a moment his lips were pressed upon it; then his gaze rose to meet hers as she looked down upon him, a smile of much tenderness, he thought, upon her face.

"Perchance, my lady," he said softly, "perchance, should you come through it safely, some time in Dauphiné——"

"Perchance, Sieur Giraud, perchance," she almost whispered; then slowly withdrew her hand as he rose.

He stepped to the door and threw it open for their passage, this time after a glance without to assure himself that the way was clear. But the constable was no man to be caught; he had hurried away the moment before.

In another moment the ladies had passed from view,

yet not without a backward look over the shoulder from the Lady Agathe that repaid his watching.

With a quickened pulse the Sieur Giraud wheeled and made a pace toward the door leading without. As he did so he saw the Constable of France enter and stand in seemingly casual converse with a captain of horse. The next instant his own name was called, and he turned upon a page who desired, by order, his immediate attendance upon Count Charles de Charolais.

CHAPTER III

RAGE AND RUIN

THE fact that Count Charles was in a good humour served to somewhat hearten the Sieur Giraud for what he had to convey to him regarding the night's work.

In truth, the count seemed much pleased with himself this morning. A lackey had just handed him his sword, and having adjusted it to his proper liking, he was regarding his image in the steel mirror before him with a look almost of complacency upon his bold features. Evidently his prolonged session with the constable had been pleasing enough. He turned his head as the Sieur Giraud entered, and briefly acknowledged the latter's salute.

"Ha! You are betimes, Sieur Giraud. The hands of the clock have scarce moved since I summoned you. Such readiness is indeed pleasing," he said gaily.

"I fear my lord count gives me too much credit, since for some time I have been awaiting an audience, and had but to traverse the corridor."

"Say, rather, too little credit, then, since I have kept you waiting, Sieur Giraud," replied Count Charles graciously. "What news do you bring me? Your face was ever a hard one to read; but tell me only that you have taken that she-devil of the hills yonder, who calls herself Marcelle, and name your own reward. By St. Hubert, one wench such as she is capable of more deviltry than a score such knaves as she leads!"

The Sieur Giraud shook his head.

"No, my lord; none so good fortune attended us," he replied. "The cursed country south of here is one vast warren with deep-cut streams and broken ridges, covered thick with underbrush and black with the shadows of the forest. To ride such country by day is impossible, my lord; by night, 'tis the attempt of a madman. Yet I have tried, but the wolves have taken a safe earth. 'Twould require an army to beat the forest of Ardennes."

As he had spoken Count Charles had listened attentively, and now nodded.

"You speak the truth, I know full well, Sieur Giraud," he said. "Nor would I have set you such a task save for—for the temper I was in last night, and yet I would give much to lay hands on this Marcelle the Mad, as she calls herself."

This was nearer an apology than any words the Sieur Giraud had ever heard from Count Charles, and as he bowed low he marveled thereat. Would he go further and speak of the Lady Agathe? But no; the count considered that passage forever closed in the lives of both of them. This was evident in his next speech.

"Your errand, then, was wholly without result, Sieur Giraud? You learned naught of that mysterious 'something' which was to pass over the walls of Bouvignes last night?"

Though the man had nerved himself to the recital, though he had been rehearsing the best manner of its telling, now, brought face to face with actuality, he hesitated. The count was quick to note this and whirled upon him in some impatience, and the Sieur Giraud caught the quick gleam in his dark eyes and the slight quiver in his nostrils.

"You understood me, Sieur Giraud?" he said sharply.

Any further faltering would only have served to make matters worse; but adieu the well-planned recital; adieu the carefully chosen words. The Sieur Giraud plunged boldly at it.

"I understood, my lord count," he replied. "Ay, 'tis true, we did—Monsieur Vignolles and myself—learn something of what passed over the walls of Bouvignes."

"Ah, then your mission has not been devoid of all fruit!" exclaimed Count Charles. "And what was this mystic something which the mad woman deemed of such interest to me?"

"It was an effigy, my lord."

Count Charles was silent a moment, then shrugged his shoulders.

"Ha! 'Tis ever the resort of fools!" he cried. "An effigy of myself, I suppose?"

Sieur Giraud bowed.

"And you learned this?" continued the count.

"From an old vine-grower, at whose house Monsieur Vignolles and I made inquiries, some three leagues south on the road to Dinant. The thing seems to have been planned for days, and is common knowledge thereabouts. Also, from the same source, we learned something of this woman of the hills and her company."

Count Charles made a gesture of contempt.

"The Companions of the Green Tent," he said sneeringly. "Companions of the gibbet they shall become ere long!"

"The band led by this Marcelle the Mad is but a small part of the rabble claiming the name, my lord count," said the Sieur Giraud. "The woods of the Ardennes are infested with the breed—some thousands, I'll

be sworn, and, from the vine-grower's tale, a terror to both the people of Dinant and to the countryside."

"They shall pay for it, have no fear, Sieur Giraud," snapped Count Charles. "They are of that accursed town of Dinant, these 'Companions.' That town has thrown defiance at us long enough. Well you know how its pig-headed people have raised a feud with our town of Bouvignes, so that now no man's life is safe in these hills."

"Yet common report has it that 'twas Bouvignes that was the aggressor, my lord count," ventured the Sieur Giraud.

"'Tis a lie!" roared the count, whose anger at the very mention of Dinant knew no limits. "'Tis a lie, I tell you! Ah, wait; wait till Monseigneur the Duke arrives. He would not miss it for worlds, and so I delay; yet when I strike Dinant will never forget the blow. They look to Louis for aid. Bah! He is too intent on stealing my northern provinces to spare them a thought."

He broke off abruptly and fell to pacing the floor. As for the Sieur Giraud, he kept a discreet silence. Full well he knew that the affair about Bouvignes was but a fight born of trade jealousy. Full well he knew that the people of Bouvignes, long envious of the prosperity of Dinant, of its great copper industry of *Dinanderie*, had in petty spite flung a blazing effigy of Louis over the walls of Dinant some weeks before. What more natural than the retaliation of which he had just learned. He knew as well, did the Sieur Giraud, how the whole trouble had arisen from the appointment of Louis de Bourbon to the Bishopric of Liège. All this the Sieur Giraud knew, yet, being less than a fool, kept silent.

Count Charles suddenly came to a stop before him.

"This effigy; you know who had a hand in that, Sieur Giraud?" he asked.

"Its maker, as well as the leader of the band which bore it to Bouvignes, was one Gaspard Lenoir, an artisan of Dinant. So much the old man told me under compulsion. A mere boy I judge him to be from his description."

"And well chosen for the deed, since 'tis but boy's play," said the count shortly. "I shall remember the name—Gaspard Lenoir. You have done well, Sieur Giraud. You may withdraw and are excused from the manœuvres, in view of your night's work. So they find an effigy of me pleasing, do they? We shall see how they take the original before many days."

The count's mind would revert to that insult, lightly though he affected to take it. The Sieur Giraud stood a moment undecided, then spoke in low voice:

"It is of that I had not finished speaking, my lord count," he said.

Count Charles, with a surprised look, motioned him to proceed.

"The effigy was first set ablaze ere being tossed over the wall, my lord, and——"

"I had supposed as much," cut in the count quickly.

"It was dressed in a semblance of your costume, my lord," continued the Sieur Giraud, feeling desperately for his words; "and attached to it was a shield bearing an escutcheon."

"Let them beware how they play with my shield!" said Count Charles grimly.

"My lord, 'twas not your shield, though proper for it, save—save——"

"Save what, Sieur Giraud?" exclaimed the count.

"Save that it bore the bend sinister, my lord count."

It had come out at last. The Sieur Giraud waited for the outburst, yet for a full moment not a sound broke the stillness save the noises of the street beneath. Then, with the roar of a maddened bull, Count Charles relaxed all hold on himself.

"So! These Dinant pigs be not content with casting derision upon me, but must needs have their accursed fling at the honour of my mother. A bastard they would label me, eh? Then by that name they have thought to blacken, by the fair name of my house, and by God, no longer may they look for mercy!"

The Sieur Giraud fell back before him, for the great bulk of the man and his transformed features threw a wave of fear into his veins. Angry outbursts were common enough with Count Charles, but ne'er had the Sieur Giraud seen him wholly mad before. His teeth ground savagely together, and his great hands were clenched till the very bones threatened to crack with the strain.

"And I had meditated punishment in ordinary upon these fools, these defamers!" roared the count. "By Our Lady, now have my eyes been opened! For this outrage upon my house Dinant shall give its very life, its very existence. Not one stone shall remain on another of all its walls; not one roof above the earth; and by God! such survivors as there may be after I am done I will scatter to the four winds! Dinant shall become as a desert, and its very name synonymous with desolation and misery!"

His hand now was fumbling nervously at his hilt. By a great effort he steadied himself long enough to say, as he waved the Sieur Giraud from the room:

"This is no idle boast, Sieur Giraud. You shall see its fulfilment, I promise you. And now go; I would be alone."

And the Sieur Giraud tarried not an instant, but backed through the door and rapidly made for the entrance. As he did so the constable passed him and acknowledged his salute with a smiling face.

With the pleasant consciousness of an ugly business ended, the Sieur Giraud made his way quickly through the crowds of soldiery till he came to the street where the horses of his company were quartered. There was now only on his mind the matter of those mounts for the Lady Agathe, and that, with the aid of a man-at-arms who held him in high favour, he speedily arranged. For himself he had no mind to take advantage of Count Charles's offer to relieve him from duty at the review. It was policy for him to be there, as the Lady Agathe had said. With that in mind, he devoted the time until the half hour before ten to inspecting his men and then mounted, leaving orders for the formation of his command, and rode slowly toward the count's quarters.

As he drew rein at the door the count himself came to the window and beckoned him to enter. Dismounting and handing his rein over to a lackey, he made haste to comply.

As he entered he was glad to note that Count Charles's anger had seemingly spent itself, yet he seemed strangely uneasy, and looked ever and anon from the window as though expecting some one.

"You have not seen fit to forego the pleasure of manœuvres under this sun, Sieur Giraud," he said with perhaps a trace of irony in his tone. "By my faith, were all of your temper, we should soon need no morning call!"

"A night in the saddle was scarce enough to warrant such retirement, my lord count," answered the Sieur Giraud.

"Some would have found such a night's experience quite sufficient reason, Sieur Giraud," replied the count drily and in such strange tone that the Sieur Giraud looked furtively at him as he again shot a glance from the window.

"Yet I have never found you aught than faithful, Sieur Giraud," continued Count Charles. "Let me see; your father was a physician at Paris, was he not?"

"He was at the bedside of King Charles VII. in his last illness, my lord count," replied the Sieur Giraud.

"An honour, indeed; yet methinks were he alive to-day he would be proud of what you have come to at seven-and-a-score years—what I have made you, would he not, Sieur Giraud?"

"He would, my lord count," was the puzzled answer, for the motive of this questioning was not clear.

"And he would marvel that such preference could be attained in the three years you have been attached to me?" persisted Count Charles. "And consider that such advancement was deserving of the utmost devotion and submission to its donor?"

"He could not think otherwise, my lord," and again there was wonderment in his tone as to what all this was leading.

At that moment there came the clatter of hoofs from without, and again the count looked down upon the street. The Sieur Giraud made no doubt these were the mounts for Count Charles and his staff for the review.

"Then, since your father would have deemed such return only fair for so great profit, there must be little of his blood flowing in your veins, Sieur Giraud."

The words fell with icy coldness from the count's lips as he turned and faced the other.

"I—I do not understand, my lord," he faltered.

Count Charles stamped his spurred heel viciously, as though treading life from some crawling thing.

"Whatever else you may be, you have never shown yourself the pure fool, save in respect to the one thing I have in mind, Sieur Giraud," he said. "You lie when you say you do not understand, or else you are become of a sudden duller than the dullest. In that event, you will require awakening."

He clapped his hands heavily, and a page entered by a side door even as he ended.

"My compliments to the Lady Agathe de Laval and Madame la Comtesse de Laubec, and that I beseech their instant attendance ere I set out for the field."

The page backed from the room with lowered head. As for the Sieur Giraud, he stood lost in conjecture. Clearly Count Charles knew something, but how much? As they waited the coming of the ladies, the count whimsically slashed at flies as they darted about the room and paid no heed to his companion. An instant summons from the count meant naught else, and a moment or two only had passed when the Lady Agathe entered, followed by the older woman. The former gave a start on seeing the Sieur Giraud present, though it was but passing.

"You have word for us, my lord count?" she asked, turning her gaze straight into the count's.

He swept her from head to foot with one hawklike glance.

"You have anticipated the very request I had to make, it seems, my Lady Agathe, which was that you don riding costume and join me at the review," he said, and pointed to the booted foot, which showed its tip beneath the hem of her riding kirtle.

The Lady Agathe gasped faintly and the colour fled from her face.

"My lord, I—I would pray to be excused. My head——"

"Is whirling, no doubt, my lady," he snapped suddenly. "And does Madame la Comtesse suffer from the same sudden attack?"

But this poor soul could think of naught to say, and so swept him a most profound courtesy.

Count Charles abandoned his false manner.

"Enough of this, my ladies! Think you to carry on your precious schemes behind my back?" he cried. "Know, then, that I know all. So bold a plan this was, though, that I questioned the report of it laid before me. But look you here—you, Sieur Giraud."

He motioned the latter to the window.

"See you those mounts below?"

A glance sufficed the Sieur Giraud. They were the very beasts he had sent to the rendezvous for the use of the Lady Agathe.

"Ha! You need not answer. I see 'tis not your first view of them."

He turned again to the Lady Agathe.

"As for you, my lady, and you, Madame la Comtesse, a pity 'twere to render the task of donning such costumes wholly fruitless. You shall indeed ride the horses the Sieur Giraud has so kindly provided, and you shall see as much of the manœuvres as your surrounding escort will allow. Unfortunately, our field lies not in the direction of Dauphiné."

The Lady Agathe had recovered something of her spirit.

"The work of some sneaking spy, my lord count!" she said bitterly enough.

" Yet useful in this instance, my Lady Agathe. I beg of you cloak yourselves, my ladies, with such expedition as may be, for I hear my own horses now coming from the stables." And imperiously he waved them forth, but as the Lady Agathe went her eyes were fixed on the Sieur Giraud's, and in her look was a mighty, swelling plea for forgiveness.

The door had hardly closed upon them when Count Charles addressed himself to the Sieur Giraud.

" For less offence than you have given I have hanged some, Sieur Giraud," he said. " I spare you, perchance because I cannot forget that day at Montlhery, yet I will have no man about me to whom my word is not law. The obedience I demand must be blind; I want no reasons; I will have no contention. Of the four roads from Namur take your choice, and thank God you are permitted so to do. You have done me some good service, and for it I have squared the account by raising you above older men who have been longer of my household. You lacked appreciation, and now—it is finished. A guard awaits you without; they will escort you through the gates. Adieu, Sieur Giraud!"

For a moment the man staggered beneath the blow so swiftly dealt. He raised his head and seemed about to speak. Count Charles's whip pointed inexorably to the door.

And thus the Sieur Giraud, ruined in fortune, stripped of the authority he had so briefly enjoyed, and crushed in spirit, reeled heavily from the presence of his former master. Nor till the gates were at his back did he come to full realisation of his misfortune and disgrace.

CHAPTER IV

COMPANIONS OF THE GREEN TENT

SAVE for the distant murmur of a depleted hill stream tumbling lazily along its rock-strewn bed, an oppressive stillness was in the air. High above in the fleckless blue a white sun glowed consumedly, and in the open beneath all things shimmered in the quivering heat waves that rose from the arid earth.

Yet under the great green roof of the forest of Ardennes was a cool freshness in utter contrast with conditions without. Such few rays of sunlight as forced a passage through the motionless canopy fell in but weak and scattered patches on undergrowth and sward.

An ideal retreat this on such a day, one might say; and so, in truth, seemed to think the score or more ragged and unshaven men who sprawled in various attitudes in that part of the forest overlooking Dinant. Little there was of agreement in their dress, though they were of one band; and, withal, much that was ludicrous, for he who boasted doublet of superfine quality was quite likely to suffer sadly as to hose, while his neighbour, sporting the hose which properly belonged with the doublet, completed his attire with the rough, leathern jerkin of an artisan. Some were barefoot; the legs and feet of others rudely bound with thongs of deerskin, and clearly each had habited himself in accordance with some system of spoil and in such apparel as

had fallen to his share. But one token they bore in common, the twig of pine which adorned their caps. And yet these vagabonds, despite their wretched state, were happy—most outright vagabonds are—if one might judge by their general hilarity, an hilarity which scarce seemed shared by the few half-starved dogs which were curled up in their midst and slept with ever a wary eye upon their guardians.

At a little distance from the men sat a small knot of women, some half dozen slatternly, unkempt creatures, who busied themselves over some steaming mixture in a great kettle over the fire. There was youth in the figures and movements of some of these; but age, a cruel age, had set its mark upon their faces, and hardship had ground enduring lines where flesh should have been smooth. Yet even these women were for the moment heedless of the past—forgetful of the miseries which had driven them to this life of wild beasts. Obviously, affairs must have been prosperous with this band of Companions of the Green Tent, for such they were.

"Faith, and when shall we repeat the stroke of yesterday, comrades?" cried a rather sullen-looking man of hardly twoscore and ten who formed one of a group of five playing at cards in the very centre of the company. He paused in the act of dealing and added:

"Six rolls of velvet, a double handful of golden crowns, two as good horses as there are in Burgundy; 'twas a rich haul, Tite, and may St. Hubert bless you for the gift of these cards!"

There was a hum of approval on his ending, as he dealt the cards rapidly around the circle. The one addressed as Tite, a wrinkled and gray-haired man of nigh threescore, looked up as he gathered in his portion.

"Well may you say so, Crépin, since, if I know

aught of cards, these have cost my lord the bishop scarce less than a score *sols parisis* the pack," he answered, and added: "And when I laid my first stake 'twas on a pack with no queen, but chevalier instead; so you may know how many years I've handled them. But ne'er before have such as these come my way."

The other players laughed as he threw a card into the centre and placed two coins before him, as showing his stake. In truth, 'twas an outrage for such hands to defile the gold and resplendent painting these cards bore. One might well believe Tite's estimate of their cost in Paris.

Crépin slapped the cards he held against his hand.

"Methinks the bishop will suffer greater woe in the loss of these than he would in the Pope's curse," he cried.

"To the devil with my lord the bishop!" growled another of the players, one André Vaucler, a former master artisan in brass work. "Why should he have a thought? Has he ever spared one for us, save to drive us the farther toward ruin?"

An ugly murmur of assent greeted the words.

"You have reason, André," cried Poncet Meux, another former metal worker. "Let the bishop take to dice if he must game. But, by my faith, I'd like to see his face when he hears of how his messenger was served."

"He won't hear, boy," said Tite quietly, paying over to Crépin what he had just lost. "He won't hear; at least, not for some time, since a clout on the head will keep the man in Bouvignes a fortnight. 'Twas thither I took him on his own horse and left him at handy distance to the walls."

"The more fool you!" exclaimed Crépin in a surly

voice. "A knife between the ribs was his desert; but you always play the——"

The hand of Tite fell roughly on his shoulder and he started quickly, while his hand stole to his belt.

"Look you here, Crépin Brune," said Tite in an even tone, "when you were born I was trying to forget the things you think to know. There is one in our company who may pass upon my conduct, and that one is not you, Crépin. Marcelle is satisfied; therefore, do you hold your tongue. What I wanted, that I had from the bishop's messenger, whom chance and his own stupidity in choosing such a route threw in my way. I had no use for the fool's life. When you have done aught to warrant it, then may you talk as you list, but till then ne'er again speak to me as you have. And," he added, as he caught the other's motion, "take your hand from that knife, lad, lest you cut yourself."

A roar of laughter greeted this sally, and Crépin's hand left his belt. It had been the action of a dolt, in truth, since Tite was the idol of all the rest. Yet the man's face was lowering, and an ugly gleam was in his eye as he growled:

"From you I'll take the words, Tite; but you'll know some day which is the better man of us."

And at that another burst of shouting arose, and Crépin threw down his cards angrily and rose to his feet. At the sound of the laughter one of the women came up to the group, and, as Crépin ended, her harsh voice rang out in derision. A great, coarse woman was this one, who towered over Crépin as she planted herself before him, arms akimbo and head bent mockingly to one side. As a delicate tribute to her Amazonian proportions, she passed by the name of Petite Maman.

"Is it so, Crépin?" she cried. "We have to choose

'twixt you and Tite some day? Well, so be it. Herewith and now I do cast my vote."

With that she bent quickly and thrust the end of the twig she carried into Tite's mouth. With the utmost complacency Tite bit off the piece of deer meat and, throwing the stick to one side, chewed away with an epicurean air.

"Bravo, Petite Maman!" shouted Bonne Fleuron, the youngest of them all, from where she stood at the kettle. "My vote the same way, Tite."

"And mine, and mine!" came in one laughing breath from Ulrique Cadet and Célie Lespere.

Petite Maman extended her arms to Crépin and cried mockingly:

"You see the Fates are against you, Crépin; yet come—Petite Maman will be more kind."

"To the devil with you, you hag!" growled Crépin sourly, while the others roared at Petite Maman's air of entreaty and the supplication in her ugly features.

"Much would I give to know why you should give yourself such airs, Crépin Brune," she said with much contempt, and then turned again to Tite. "But more would I give to know whether the stew be cooked to your liking, Tite."

He looked up at her as she stood awaiting his verdict.

"Ne'er have I tasted meat of such a flavour, Petite Maman," he said, and smacked his lips.

"There, do you hear that, you others? You, Crépin, do you hear?" cried the woman. "He swears to like it, and yet 'twas naught but clear gristle I gave him. Now you'll know, Crépin, why 'tis we like old Tite; because naught that goes wrong e'er rubs him the wrong way, and he spares himself the trouble of whining and complaining. See; he's chewing at the thing yet!" she

added, catching Tite in the act of shifting from one side of his mouth to the other the cartilage he had been unable to masticate.

There was a twinkle in the old man's eye as he rose, and drawing the gristle from his mouth, examined it curiously.

"I did my best for your fame as cook, Petite Maman," he said.

"Tite, you're a dear!" she cried, and ere he could move to resist, she had planted a sounding kiss on the little space free from beard under his eye. The next moment she was shouting, and above them all her voice was supreme—calling them to the kettle for their shares of the savoury compound within.

At the same moment, and even as the men rose, a slight figure, dressed from head to foot in green, came through the forest at one side and walked toward them. With no exception the caps came off those tousled heads at sight of her. Had Monsieur Vignolles been present he would have had no difficulty in recognising the newcomer as Marcelle the Mad.

"My comrades, till now I have had no chance to count the spoils of yesterday. They are even greater than I had hoped for," she said quickly. "I shall divide them according to the usual arrangement, one-fifth to the gainer, the rest in equal shares. As the purse taken from my lord the bishop's man contained a score and ten golden crowns, here are your six, Tite; and do you see to the division of the remainder."

She handed two small sacks to him addressed, while the men crowded round her eagerly.

"But you, Marcelle; you, as usual, have taken naught!" exclaimed Tite.

"When I am in need I shall call upon you, Tite,

since you are now become one of affluence," she answered with a laugh that showed the evenness and whiteness of her teeth. "Besides, I have, in truth, laid hands on one of the pieces of velvet; the rest you may apportion as seems best, Petite Maman. Ne'er would I have courage for such task or the consequences of my distribution."

She laughed again at the covetous look which had stolen into the women's faces at mention of the finery, and before realising it they were laughing with her. There was something of contagion in the upward toss of her head as she flung her short, black locks backward from her face, alive with such colour as only the sun and free air of heaven may impart. In truth, Monsieur Vignolles had not erred in rating this maid of the forest beautiful, yet it was an almost rude beauty, quite in accord with that which gave charm to the wild roses clinging to the undergrowth and grace to the lithe and flowing ferns at their side.

"And now, comrades, let me no longer delay your repast," she continued. "The men watching on the hills must be relieved within the hour. Tite, you will see that there is no delay. They are affected by hunger as well as——"

She broke off short and stared straight before her; then, with a quick motion, enjoined silence. The others, following her look, for a moment stood amazed. Then Tite and some others stole softly to the trees where hung their bows and noiselessly fitted shaft to string. That done, they waited Marcelle's word, watching closely the one who approached.

For head upon breast and eyes upon the ground a man was unconsciously walking into their midst; a large man he was, with rich dress and a great sword, which

for easier carrying he had caught up under his arm. Dust lay thick over all his attire, from the mantle which he had thrown aside so that it trailed from one shoulder to the great boots which spouted little powdery puffs as he walked.

It was not any sound on the part of those he approached; it was not any consciousness of the presence of others, but the faint scent of food from the kettle which, after he had run his head well within the noose, caused the man to halt and throw up his head.

The bow-strings of Tite and the others were half-drawn on the instant; yet Marcelle made no sign, but stood meeting the man's gaze, which was full directed upon her. His sword slipped to the ground as, with a fleeting glance, he swept the rest of the band. Then, his shoulders shrugged ever so lightly, his gaze returned to Marcelle, and with a look of weariness he leaned upon his hilt and seemed to await the consequences of his position with utter indifference.

"Well, fool!"

There was little that augured well for the man in the tone Marcelle used; yet he seemed to care naught for that or for the offence her words carried.

"You have named me aright," he said simply.

Marcelle scarce knew how to take his manner. She feared a trap of some kind, and turned quickly to Poncet Meux.

"Do you take a half-score men, Poncet, and scour the wood hereabouts," she said. "No; Tite and you, Crépin, remain here," and then again facing the stranger, and with a show of mockery, "And now, who and what may you be, my lord, and what spying game is it you play?"

He smiled faintly.

"Have I played it like a spy?" he asked; but his question only served to further rouse Marcelle, and she stamped her foot on the ground in anger. The band drew nearer and cast lowering looks at him who so dared brave her, but he paid them no heed.

"Answer me not with idle question!" cried Marcelle. "Who and what are you?"

"For the first, it matters not; call me by any name you will save my own," he answered. "For the second —what am I?—the answer is even easier—nothing."

"Think not to hoodwink me by evasion," cried Marcelle; "yet since you would for the moment conceal your identity, I would hear whence you came and with what purpose."

The man laughed, but there was no mirth in it.

"Whence came I, forsooth?" He glanced down at his apparel and shook his head as he muttered, "I must have come leagues, leagues without knowing it."

"I am waiting!" cried Marcelle, and he shook himself as one awaking from a sound sleep.

"I came from Namur; from the household of Count Charles de Charolais—Charles the Bold, some call him —and with the purpose of seeking death."

There was an ugly surge forward of the company at mention of Count Charles's name.

"The dolt has chosen the right direction to achieve his purpose," said Crépin Brune under his breath.

Marcelle quieted the men with a sign.

"We are favoured of late with visits from your camp," she said shortly. "But yesterday we received one Monsieur Vignolles, and now you appear. Did we repeat our treatment of him in your case it might become unpleasant. Our hospitality would soon become overstrained."

"And so you would dispose of me. Well, what of it?"

Again Marcelle was puzzled by the man's heedless tone and, for a moment, at a loss for words.

"Why have you left the Count de Charolais?" she asked suddenly, but the man shook his head.

"I will tell you no more," he said, and there was enough firmness in his tone. "I had not sought this meeting; but since it has happened, let events take their course. 'Tis a solution ready to hand."

Again the men crowded toward him, but he made no move to draw the great blade before him, and they hesitated. Had he done so, they would have been upon him in a body.

Crépin Brune spoke, and he voiced the sentiments of most of the rest.

"What matters it why he left that 'cursed Burgundian, Marcelle? That ever he was in that service is enough for us."

"Ay, that it is!" came cries from all sides, and then of a sudden André Vaucler, who had been watching the stranger's face intently, burst forth:

"I know this man, Marcelle! Poncet, Poncet, do you not remember last night?"

But Poncet had gone, as Marcelle had bade him, some moments before.

The stranger looked sharply at André, but evidently was unable to place him in mind.

"Speak, André," commanded Marcelle.

"Last night, some time about the hour of twelve, Poncet and I set out north to pay his father a visit. Poncet is no man of Dinant, but son to a vine-grower, as you know. By my faith, 'twas well we went across country, for as we were sliding down the hill behind

the house, two troopers rode in by the front. When they had entered we stole up, and Poncet, knowing the house, of course, had no trouble in seeing through the window who these men were. One was Monsieur Vignolles and the other this man here."

"And you made no effort to get an arrow through the one or the other of them?" cried Crépin.

"'Twas in my mind, but Poncet would not have it—said 'twould mean his father's life and vineyard," answered André. "And well it was we tried it not, since, when they did leave, we followed and saw them join a score men-at-arms, who awaited them a hundred paces along the road. Then we went back, and the old man told us what was afoot. The two had asked many questions about the affair at Bouvignes and forced him to tell them much about Marcelle."

"Marcelle!"

The cry was one angered roar.

"Ay, Marcelle, indeed!" shouted André. "'Twas to take her they were prowling about the hills, as well as to learn of the doings at Bouvignes. I reported the thing to Marcelle herself this morning."

"Ay, 'tis so; yet I paid it scant attention then," she said, and her dark eyes were fixed upon the stranger's. "Methinks you made no mention of names, André. Did you learn by what name this one went?"

"Ay, for Poncet's father heard the other address him by it——"

"To the devil with his name!" cried Crépin. "This man, last night in the service of Charolais, hunting down our Marcelle, and we stay to speak of names! Come on, comrades!"

Marcelle threw herself before the object of their assault, who stood motionless as before.

"Back, dogs!" she cried, and at sight of her furious look they hesitated. "Tite, do you take your stand by me. Till I am done with this man, shoot down the first who would lay hand on him. You would interfere with my affairs, Crépin, you fool! Once before I taught you a lesson, and now beware lest my patience be at an end. André, continue; you were saying——"

"That Poncet's father caught this man's name—ay, Marcelle; 'twas the Sieur Giraud."

A second only Marcelle was silent. Then she whirled about.

"You are the Sieur Giraud d'Orson?" she said.

"Why deny it now?" he answered, as though discomfited at the way it had become known.

"You write very pretty letters, Sieur Giraud," snapped Marcelle. "Was your sudden downfall with Count Charles due to a lady, perchance?"

He was silent. The Lady Agathe's name was then to be bandied about among this rabble despite his efforts.

"I beg of you, Marcelle——"

The words had escaped him ere he knew it, and the involuntary pleading gesture that had accompanied them.

For a moment she seemed disposed to laugh in his face, then said in a low, hurried voice:

"As you will; I wage no fight against any lady;" and then louder, that the others should hear: "You see we are well informed, Sieur Giraud, perchance as well as Count Charles himself. And now as to your disposition."

"Again, Marcelle, I warn you there can be but one ending for this man!" cried Crépin.

"And are you all of the same opinion?" she asked.

A great cry of assent rose from many throats.

"He shall die?"

"Ay, ay, that he shall."

Marcelle thought for a moment, then, raising her hand, said quietly:

"Back; I would have a word with the Sieur Giraud."

"But—" began Crépin.

"Did you not hear, fool?" she cried. "Back, I say!" And with bad enough grace he complied.

Marcelle turned to the Sieur Giraud.

"You have heard what they say, Sieur Giraud," she said rapidly. "Nor may I gainsay them if you persist in defiance. Yet, because I believe— But tell me first, did the letter I returned by Monsieur Vignolles have aught to do with your disgrace?"

The Sieur Giraud looked at her earnestly. No, she was not playing with him.

"It was the beginning of things," he answered.

"Then would I save you if I may, despite your trying to run me to earth."

"And why, Marcelle?" he asked involuntarily.

"Because—because of that other with whose affairs I ne'er should have meddled," she said, and her eyes fell before his fixed gaze.

As for the Sieur Giraud, the thought of death was already less attractive to him as she spoke. In truth, there was much good remaining in the world since this wild girl could cherish such thoughts.

"Marcelle, you are not of these people?" he said suddenly, and for an instant he noted the colour fly from her face at his gesture toward the others.

"That I am their leader, Marcelle the Mad, is sufficient answer to that," she made reply. "But come; Sieur Giraud, 'tis no time for aught save what concerns you. There is one way I can save your life, I believe. You must swear to become one of us."

He drew himself up proudly. He, the Sieur Giraud d'Orson, a member of this ragged band, with the stamp of outlawry deep upon him and all men's hands turned against his own! And then he laughed harshly, and his hands relaxed their tense grip on his sword hilt. In truth, were not all men's hands turned against his as it was? 'Twas a short step from what he had become to what Marcelle suggested. But did he truly care to live? —that was the vital question.

"You have commanded a body of men-at-arms," said Marcelle. "You would be useful to us, Sieur Giraud, in the defence of Dinant when the time comes."

"Against Count Charles?" he said moodily.

"Ay; but what of that. Are you so greatly in his debt?"

"No," he answered, "the account is settled; yet ne'er will I oppose him."

She looked curiously at him.

"Your letter breathed a devotion scarce evident in your manner now, Sieur Giraud. Methinks the Lady Agathe might find cause for murmur at your accepting death on the first reverse."

"That also is forever closed, Marcelle," he replied.

"You are fortunate in being able to look so far into the future," she said drily enough. "But come; I have made you the offer. I know not whether I may fulfil it or not; but choose, Sieur Giraud, choose!"

Her words as to the future had brought hope into his heart again. Perchance the Lady Agathe—oh! a thousand things might happen. As for fighting against Count Charles, that he would not do; but that question would come later. For the present——

"Marcelle, I accept my life at your hands. I will become a Companion of the Green Tent," he cried hoarsely.

Her eyes rested on his a moment, and, seemingly satisfied with what she saw, she turned and beckoned the men to approach. As she did so Poncet and his scouting band also crept into the circle.

"Comrades," said Marcelle, with no waver in her voice, "it has occurred to me that this man, could he be persuaded, would be useful to us. He is trained to arms as none of the rest of you are. I have offered him his life in case he joins us as the lowest one among you, and he accepts. What say you?"

A moment they stood silent. Then Crépin dashed his cap to the ground in a rage.

"So that was the last word with this Sieur Giraud, was it?" he shouted. "And because he mouths his words better than the rest of us and carries more of the court air about him, you'd save his life, Marcelle? For one, I'll have none of it, nor methinks will any comrade here. The man has fought against us—against you, Marcelle——"

"That concerns me; not any of the rest of you," said Marcelle sharply. "Who is leader here, Crépin Brune, you or I? Who is it that sees you have share and share alike? Is it you, André, who seem so ready to slap Crépin on the back? Was it Moïse there, shouting so loud a moment ago for this man's life, who nursed you through the fever, Tite? Why, Tite, Tite, what are you thinking of, —— you?"

"By God, I was off my head, Marcelle!" cried Tite, and with a bound was at her side, and she rested her hand lightly on his shoulder.

And following Tite, André and Poncet took place

by her side. Yet the main body held aloof behind Crépin.

Marcelle changed her voice and manner.

"So be it, comrades! You have decided against me. Ne'er before has such occasion arisen and ne'er shall it again, for you have chosen between Crépin Brune and Marcelle and given him the preference. Adieu, comrades; I have tried to be just with you all, and when my word is disputed, I may no longer remain!"

She walked slowly away from them with never a glance back. The Sieur Giraud thought that ne'er had he seen such acting. He slipped his sword free, for now he had no intention of being butchered; but the band were paying him no heed. Instead, with one accord, they flung themselves after Marcelle with a great cry, so that she turned and retraced her steps. Crépin alone held back sullenly.

"Then the Sieur Giraud lives and becomes one of us?" she said sternly.

"Ay; only so be it you remain, Marcelle. If you say so, we'll have the devil himself for companion," replied Tite, and the rest shouted assent.

She smiled once more in their faces.

"What power the girl wielded over this rabble!" thought the Sieur Giraud.

"Then do you, Tite, see to the Sieur Giraud's wants as regards dress," she said. "I will see that he is duly sworn as a Companion, and——"

Her speech ended in a shriek of horror, and she pointed a trembling finger before her. One of the dogs of the camp had run between the legs of Crépin, upsetting him in a cursing heap. Ere the dog might recover, Crépin had seized him and, drawing his knife, had slashed savagely at the poor brute's leg, so that it now

hung helpless and limp. The cry of the wounded beast and Marcelle's shriek were simultaneous. The whole thing had occurred in an instant.

For a second the Sieur Giraud saw Marcelle sway as though about to fall. The next, she had drawn herself up and a terrible rage was in her eyes, while her face had gone dead white.

"Seize that man!"

This time there was no question of obeying her, and a dozen hands dragged Crépin to his feet.

"Crépin Brune," she cried, "scarce a month has gone by since I read you such lesson as methought no man could forget." A moment she turned to the others. "No matter why it was needful; that concerns me alone. But you lack all that goes to the making of a man, Crépin, and, because 'tis so, you shall have such treatment as is fitting for the brute you are. A moment ago you set yourself against my will. That I would have passed over; but for the blow you have just struck, for the suffering of that harmless beast, you shall pay with your own blood."

She whirled upon the others, and her eyes fairly blazed.

"To the tree with him, and a score lashes laid on by you, André Vaucler, with all the strength of your arm!" she cried.

Crépin shrieked for mercy, and fell to his knees before her.

"Away with him; I have spoken!" she said coldly.

A moment later the wretch was bound fast to a tree, his back bared for the lash. His clamorous wails rent the air; yet Marcelle stood unmoved and watched till they had released him to fall in a moaning, bleeding heap. Then she spoke as though content.

"Tite, do what you may for the dog. As for you, Sieur Giraud, the sooner your oath is taken the better it will be for you."

And drawing him a little to one side, she made him repeat after her a solemn pledge to support the Companions of the Green Tent till such time as she should grant him release. Also she would have sworn him to wage war to the death against the Count de Charolais; but this the Sieur Giraud flatly refused to do, and after a time she forebore further urging.

Tite coming up as she ended, she turned and, leaving the Sieur Giraud in his hands, slowly walked toward the hillside, where she and the other women had quarters.

As the Sieur Giraud followed Tite in the opposite direction, it occurred to him that within the hour a very considerable change had come over his prospects. Was this change for good or evil? Despite the fact that his life had been spared, he could find no answer to the question, for the screams of the man Crépin Brune still rang in his ears.

CHAPTER V

THE SHADOW OF THE LADY AGATHE

ON the crest of one of the loftiest ridges of the forest the Sieur Giraud lay sprawled, with an air that seemed to betoken complete freedom from worldly concern. Before him fell the sheer wall of a barren ravine, scarred and torn by rough excrescences of slate and black marble, and affording scant root-hold to the few scrubby pines that clung desperately to its surface. Above the opposing side of the gorge and far away he could trace the silver line marking the course of the Meuse and catch the sun's dull reflection from the leaden roofs of Dinant and Bouvignes. Such was the post they had allotted him, these wanderers of the hills. Upon other favoured heights were many more watchful eyes, and small indeed must be that moving object which should avoid their scrutiny.

It is even probable that Count Charles, had he chanced upon the Sieur Giraud at the moment, would have passed him by unrecognised, so great the change that had been wrought in his appearance. He had preserved his own attire, it was true, so far as hose and jerkin went; but the gorgeous mantle and studded brigantine were gone, and in place of the great spurred boots he wore the thongs of deerskin common to the band. His own crimson cap, with its jewelled rim, was replaced by a turbanlike headpiece of sombre hue, the scarf of which fell upon his shoulder. This last Tite

had growlingly insisted on, and in its folds was thrust the green emblem of the Companions. Yet the man's face had changed in no way, since by some artful means, and perchance by reason of a returning pride, he had managed to keep back the beard that thrived so with the others. The close growth upon his upper lip stood out the more boldly in consequence. By his side lay the bow, which had displaced his sword, and the bundle of arrows he had plucked from his belt on lying down.

But the Sieur Giraud's easy attitude of nonchalance was in no way reflective of the man's mind. In truth, once more he had come to look on life as worth living, yet the rôle of outlaw he had been forced to adopt weighed heavily upon him. His new associates, save for Marcelle and perchance Tite, had filled him with an aversion he had been unable to conceal during the week that had passed since his joining them. As for Marcelle, he had acknowledged his inability to know her. She was comparable to no woman he had ever seen; a child of whim and fancies, yet, in truth, no child in the iron rule she held over the wretches who submitted to her. He had seen her stand unmoved while the blood poured from Crépin's back and his piteous cries rung in her ears; yet she had gone pale with horror and tears had sprung to her eyes at sight of a dog's misery. For an instant he had caught sight of the heart back of the cold, implacable exterior.

Then why had she so stepped in to save him? He fancied 'twas not for the reason she gave, since she could have no real knowledge of the Lady Agathe; and if any one thing could be said to dominate her, it was her hatred of the Count de Charolais and the whole House of Burgundy. Nor, as he had hinted to her, was she of these people. these refugees of Dinant. He had

seen it in a hundred ways; her talk, her bearing, and the deference, beyond that due a mere outlaw chief, shown her by all. Whence came this strange creature? Whence emanated this implicit confidence? None volunteered a word thereon, and his footing with the band was not strong enough to warrant much questioning. During the week he had been with the Companions Marcelle often had been absent, and he had heard that she had gone to Dinant, but on what errands he knew naught. He believed that there were few even among her own band in whom she confided.

And then the thoughts of the Sieur Giraud turned to the Lady Agathe, and his gaze flew northward over the wooded country. Ay, yonder, yonder, forever beyond his reach, there was all that he had left behind him—there the perished hopes he had once been mad enough to hold. Monsieur Vignolles, willing or no, would wed the Lady Agathe—and then he started, for he remembered that 'twas on the morrow she was to begin her journey to Bruges.

He buried his face in the cool moss beneath him, and a sound, half groan, half curse, escaped his lips.

"Then why do you remain, Sieur Giraud? The woods of the Ardennes are free for all. Why do you stay?"

He raised his head quickly, and there was Marcelle. She had come up the steep behind him with the silent tread of a fawn, and now paused, leaning upon the oaken stick that had aided her ascent. Her lips were slightly parted and her bosom rose and fell quickly from her exertion, while the grace of her attitude and the suggested outlines of her figure served for a moment to hold the Sieur Giraud in silent contemplation.

"Why do you stay, Sieur Giraud?" she repeated.

He assumed no pretence of not understanding. Strong men are not given to passionate outbursts without cause. She had heard and divined.

"Why do I stay, Marcelle? Because I am chained; chained, as you know, to this life. *You* at least should not ask such question," he said in bitter voice.

She made no reply and he went on:

"Ay, chained I am, and the links are double welded, since I am held to this accursed existence by my own word. At times I ask myself if it would not have been better——"

She cut in shortly.

"Yes, yes, I know. And the answer is, Sieur Giraud?"

"That what you did was for the best, Marcelle," he answered.

"You are glad to live, yet unwilling to pay the price," she said after a moment.

"Some things may be bought too dearly, Marcelle, and to herd one's self with such a rabble——"

"Ay, rabble it is, in truth, Sieur Giraud, though you are bold to throw such words in my face," she cried. "But tell me, what has made these men what they are? What has driven them from Dinant yonder; from the peaceful trades they practised but twelve months agone? Do men such as these put a price on their heads for naught?

"They seem well enough content with vagabondage," said the Sieur Giraud in a tone savouring of the sneer.

"Bah; you cannot see beneath the surface!" cried Marcelle. "You are of the north and understand not these people, and, besides, have been of the very party which has brought them to such case. You may not

see beyond the wall of desperate outlawry these men have built about them, but I know; I have seen what they have suffered since the coming of this Louis de Bourbon as bishop. And what I have not seen they have told me; and we are but a handful among the thousands roaming these hills."

She spoke with an earnestness that was compelling, and the Sieur Giraud caught some of her spirit; yet his conception of these freebooters was too strong to be shaken.

"My Lord the Bishop has long since betaken himself to Huy," he said. "If the people deemed themselves oppressed, there were the *échevins*, the judges."

"You have well learned the Burgundian chant, Sieur Giraud," said Marcelle impatiently. "Law? You would speak of law anywhere in this whole province of Liège! There is no law save through the Pope, the bishop, and back of the bishop, the Duke of Burgundy. But always, always the Church. When the people opposed the profligacies of Louis de Bourbon, when they invoked the law to stay a taxation that was rendering them paupers, the wand of office was lowered in the mayor's hand by order of the bishop, and the doors of the court slammed in their faces. And then, when in desperation they had risen and driven this youth and his shameless retinue from their midst, then the Pope scourged them with interdict and excommunication. You who prate of justice, do you know what that meant to these people?"

The Sieur Giraud crossed himself hastily. Ay, well enough did he know what this interdict had meant; church doors closed to all comers, ominous silence in the belfries, and no sacramental service for any. For the new-born child there might be no baptism; the guilty must rest unconfessed; the betrothed, unwed; no

unction might salve the dying nor priestly blessing mark their grave when dead.

The Sieur Giraud shuddered, and Marcelle noted it. When she again spoke 'twas in gentler tone and as though he had been convinced.

"And this is why I love these people; because of what they have endured. What they are now is what they have been driven to become."

There was moisture in her great, dark eyes, and their look was far away toward Dinant. The Sieur Giraud plucked restlessly at the moss beside him.

"I have heard but the one side before, Marcelle," he said slowly. "I confess your tale has impressed me greatly, but there will be a sad day of reckoning. Neither Monseigneur the Duke nor Count Charles will suffer this state of open revolt to continue. The province of Liège and Dinant in particular are marked for vengeance."

"That we know and can but do our utmost," she answered. "You call yourself a man, Sieur Giraud. Would you have done otherwise than the Companions have done? Would you have submitted to being ground under the heel of this Louis de Bourbon?"

"No!"

His answer was prompt enough, and she ventured a step farther, while her voice hardened.

"And you would hate the Count de Charolais who marches against us, even to conspiring against his very life, and——?"

"Marcelle!"

He had risen quickly to his elbow, and his eyes met hers with an angry gleam in them she had never seen there before. It was as though a challenge had been hurled, and the gaze of both was firm.

"Marcelle, you have been rightly named; you do, in truth, speak madness," he said, "or else your grievance against Count Charles is greater than I believe. Until a week ago Count Charles was my good lord and master, and whatever has happened I forget not that. You speak of but one thing—assassination—foul murder—the thrust of a knife in the dark, or the flight of a silent shaft from a thicket—and you speak of this to me as though I might entertain such thought."

"I said, were you in our position," she cried.

"Ay, you said that; but you thought to entice assent from me. 'Twas in your eyes, and is there still," he made answer. "God's truth! Did you think to have dragged me down to that? Seek what you look for among the others. André, Poncet, Crépin; I'd believe it of any of them, but I looked for it not from you, Marcelle."

This time her eyes gave up the strife, and for a brief space wandered from his. She realised keenly that her stroke had failed; had been too bold, and, as she now saw, premature at best.

"You leap too quickly, Sieur Giraud; I said naught of assassination. Surely to conspire against the life of an enemy may not mean murder," she said.

"Yet that was your meaning, Marcelle; of that I'll be sworn!" he replied. "I had begun to believe there might be something in the cause you fight, but you have undone all that, and I warn you that in this thing my hand will be set against you. You have bought my life, and 'tis yours for a word, I know; but have a care how you use the purchase, Marcelle."

She tossed her head, and the Sieur Giraud could but lament inwardly that such beauty should harbour these mad impulses.

"Since you persist in the delusion, Sieur Giraud, be it so," she said. "The facts will appear in due time. In truth, the Burgundian Court laid heavy tribute on your loyalty, but then——"

He waited for the conclusion of her sentence, but her eyes were directed toward the north and she seemed unaware of the omission.

"But then?" he asked.

Her weight drove the staff on which she leaned deep into the soft upper soil.

"But then I was well-nigh forgetting the Lady Agathe," she said quietly.

And at that he started, for, in truth, he himself had had no thought of the Lady Agathe since Marcelle had first come up. He made no reply, but his gaze followed her own. In a moment she drew the staff from the ground and, coming nearer the edge of the ravine, seated herself on a great block of black marble that threatened to topple over at any moment. Then she said pensively:

"Ay, I had nigh forgot the Lady Agathe, yet has she been much on my mind since I first chanced upon her name."

To the Sieur Giraud there was much that displeased him in hearing the Lady Agathe's name on the lips of this girl, in view of what he had divined as to her plotting against Count Charles's life. Yet he scarce knew how to make this evident. As for Marcelle, she continued in the same musing tone:

"In truth, I marvel not that this life is irksome, Sieur Giraud; yet is the world large and Fate full of caprice. The paths of the Lady Agathe and yourself may again meet."

So had she spoken that first night he had come upon them. Now he smiled bitterly to think how, for the

time, he had been heartened by such words. Marcelle regarded him closely, her elbow on knee and her chin resting on hand.

"Enough, Marcelle!" he said shortly. "If you came here to torture me with thoughts of this odious oath I have taken, you have succeeded. But I will not speak of my Lady Agathe with such as you."

He spoke scathingly, and the words cut deep into the girl's heart. With a bound she was on her feet and had raised her staff so threateningly that he threw up an arm involuntarily to ward off the blow. But it never descended, and in place of the mad outburst he expected, she only laughed harshly and lowered the weapon.

"You speak aright, Sieur Giraud," she said hoarsely. "The Lady Agathe's name must not be defiled by the lips of Marcelle the Mad. Ay, you speak aright. We are of different worlds, she and I; her life, one of luxury and contentment; mine, of privation and anxiety."

She turned and with her staff thrust a small stone into the ravine and seemed intent only on its fall. There was such bitterness, such sadness in her words that the Sieur Giraud rose quickly and, going to her side, placed his hand upon her shoulder. She trembled; and her head remained bent, so that he might not see her face through the tumbled hair.

"Forgive me, Marcelle, for my words were harsher than I had meant," he said kindly, and, as he spoke, it again bore upon his mind that this girl had saved his life. He thought that even the Lady Agathe would wish him to be gentle with her. "Forgive and forget the words, Marcelle," he continued. "In any event, 'twill be no long matter, for with the morrow the Lady Agathe passes forever out of my life."

She looked up at him quickly.

"I do not understand," she said.

And then, throwing aside all reserve, he was impelled to tell her all; how his regard for the lady had led to his ruin; how the constable had gained her hand for Monsieur Vignolles, and how, on the morrow, she was to be sent to Bruges, there to await her marriage on the return of Count Charles and the court. And as he spoke there was a strange play of light on her features, though she said not a word till he had ended.

"And once at Bruges there would be no hope of escape for the Lady Agathe; no chance such as that which failed at Namur?" she asked at length.

"Not the least," he replied. "Make no doubt of Count Charles's care of that, now he knows of that attempt."

"And who was it, think you, informed him of the plan?"

"I know not, Marcelle," he said, "nor how 'twas learned; but I'll be sworn the Count de St. Pol could tell. There are many eyes and ears in his service, and 'twas to his benefit, this exposure."

Marcelle nodded thoughtfully and turned away, and for a long time no word passed between them. In his mind was the chafing rage and chagrin he felt in his helplessness; in hers, a confusion of ideas ran riot. She had liked this man when first she had seen him stand before her, utterly indifferent to the death which threatened him. It was not what she had learned to expect in those brought before her, and his unconcern had exasperated her in that she was unable to break it down. Yet she told herself that if the man had weakened she would have allowed Crépin and the rest their way. Her determination to save him had been only a sudden freak roused in her mind by something in his manner

that was compelling. Having once taken the stand, her very pride of command had sufficed in the subsequent brawl.

And she had not been sorry that she had won. In the week he had been with them the Sieur Giraud, while showing no liking for it, had done the work of a Companion patiently enough. She had scarce spoken to him, but had watched him closely to see if he would justify her opinion of his value to the band. Even Tite, at first inclined to question, had admitted the Sieur Giraud's worth. This was after the latter had seen from his post the approach of a strong party from Bouvignes and given warning thereof in time for the Companions to scatter through the forest and avoid being surrounded.

Yet Marcelle had known no peace of mind since his coming. Her liking for him had grown as she had noted his calm submission to his lot and his faith to the oath he had taken; but there was ever the shadow of that other, the Lady Agathe, hanging like a darkening cloud over the man's spirit, and this had nettled her. What the feelings were she had for the Sieur Giraud; why this new and strange emotion which she was conscious of in his presence, she knew not. She had struggled with them by day and by night; they had caused her to toss uneasily on her couch of pine-boughs.

To-day she had resolved to end the uncertainty, and so had sought out the Sieur Giraud at his post on the hills.

He had spoken sneeringly of the Companions, her followers; yet she had endured it from him, contenting herself with trying to show their justification. Then he had—or she had, she remembered not which—let fall the name of the Lady Agathe. Always that name seemed to come up between them! And then he had stabbed

her cruelly at heart. She had raised her staff, yet struck not; and why? The next moment had told her; when he had come and placed his hand upon her shoulder—she still thrilled with the memory of it—and spoken in that kind and quiet voice. The veil had been lifted, and the great wave that had surged over her, leaving her hot and cold by turns, ay, that had been Love. Love! She had known it, and the very ground had seemed to pulse beneath her in the joy she felt. And then she had seen that he knew it not; that his thoughts were only for that other, and the receding wave had left her desolate and with a bitter hatred in her heart. Except for that other, she would then have thrown herself into his arms. It was her nature so to do, and the dictate of all the warm blood coursing through her veins. She could have made him love her. But, pitiless, the shadow of the Lady Agathe again had come between.

As he had told her of this forced marriage, her heart had leaped again within her for joy—a joy that was gone the next instant in the look of distress upon his face. A blind rage against all the world had risen within her, yet she could not bear to see the suffering of this man she loved, and had turned aside her head to shut out the sight.

All this swept like a torrent through Marcelle's mind as the two stood in such silence. Above all was the thought that the morrow would see the end of the Lady Agathe, so far as concerned him. If naught hindered, by nightfall she would be leagues away and he forbid the land to which she went. Would the Sieur Giraud then turn to her, Marcelle? Could she make him forget?

She looked at him, and a soft appeal was in her eyes; but, alas! he seemed not to be aware of her presence, and his gaze was northward.

It was borne upon her that she might not hope for the love of this man, and the blow seemed to dry the very blood within her and leave her shrivelled and cold. No; it was impossible, hopeless! And again the thought recurred to her that neither might that other enjoy his love. Ah! He might strain that gaze northward along the valley of the Meuse; the morrow would end all that, if naught hindered.

If naught hindered!

Again that phrase. She wondered why it had crept in, and then suddenly started violently.

From behind them a snatch of verse in a high, quavering voice fell upon their ears, and they turned together. It drew nearer, and a moment later André Vaucler came into view below, making his way upward toward them.

The Sieur Giraud smiled.

"It is André coming to relieve me," he said; and then, in his kindest voice, "In truth, how the time has flown, though perchance all our speech has not been o'erpleasing. You should make the rounds more often, Marcelle."

"You have liked it? You are glad that I came?" she said softly, yet with eagerness.

"Yes; I am glad you came," he answered; "companionship is something, and sometimes alone here on these hills I dread madness when I think of what I have lost. But enough! You may not understand—you, who have never felt this."

She made no answer, yet she knew that he again spoke of the Lady Agathe, and his tone cut her with its very kindness. He believed her incapable of that emotion he felt. Oh, if the man could but know!

He spoke lightly as he picked up the bow and thrust the handful of arrows within his belt.

"Yet you are young, Marcelle, and the time will come; so frown not that way lest the marks remain to turn away some André, or Crépin, or Poncet, who——"

A wild sob burst from her throat and her eyes were wet with tears that would come.

"Sieur Giraud, I hate you; hate you!" she cried, and, whirling about, fled along the ridge into the forest.

He stood a moment looking blankly after her; then whistled and, without a word to André, who just then came over the rise, strode rapidly down the hill.

CHAPTER VI

A CHANGE OF ESCORT

LITTLE liberty had there been for the Lady Agathe since that day when she had so unwillingly ridden forth to the review. Count Charles had seen to it that she was kept close in the apartments which had been allotted her, yet it was fortunate for her that the Countess de Laubec had fallen equally under his displeasure, for by that she was not deprived of all companionship. Only those in whom the count might place implicit trust were placed about her as attendants, for, once having been warned of the extent to which the Lady Agathe would go, he took no chances of a repetition of her attempt at escape.

For the first day or two she had spent much of the time in the arms of the countess, pouring her grief into that lady's sympathetic ear and alternately vowing that never would she submit to this marriage to Monsieur Vignolles, and beseeching the countess for some suggestion, some way out of the dilemma. But alas! Willing as the latter was to extend every assistance to her, what could she do save shed tears the faster and raise her hands helplessly to heaven? Count Charles had said that it should be so, and he had a way of crushing any or all who dared oppose him.

"I will appeal to Monseigneur the Duke when he arrives; I will grovel before him if need be!" had cried the Lady Agathe. "Surely he never will force me——"

But the countess had slain that hope by saying quickly:

"Let not your faith rest in that, my lady. Monseigneur's years weigh heavy upon him; so heavy that methinks his mind has returned to that of a child. Did you not tell me yourself of his overturning the table at dinner before all the lords and ladies because some one had made reference to his age, and that but a month agone? Mark you, when a man goes to such extent, there is something amiss here." She had tapped her forehead suggestively.

"Yet Monseigneur ever has seemed fond of me," the Lady Agathe had said. "I will believe that there is hope in an appeal to him."

"And I would, if I might, my lady," had been the answer; "but however much you may be in his favour, forget not 'tis his son, the Count de Charolais, on whom he dotes. By my faith, 'tis Count Charles who is the true Duke of Burgundy now, rather than Monseigneur."

And so it was, as the Lady Agathe well knew, yet with all obstinacy she had continued to argue the matter till the older woman had fairly fallen asleep.

After these first outbursts, however, the Lady Agathe became calmer, and, indeed, as the days went by, spoke less and less of her troubles. Yet the mention of Monsieur Vignolles's name always would serve to rouse her to a passion. Against him was delivered her choicest invective, and upon his shoulders she threw the entire responsibility for her plight. Inasmuch as he knew it not, this did not materially affect the gaiety which was habitual with him.

The Lady Agathe had been in better case when she gave free voice to the feelings within her. Now that she took to brooding over her wrongs, she faded visibly;

and, in truth, there was reason enough for this, since, besides her own afflictions, she was tormented by the thoughts of that one she had inflicted upon the Sieur Giraud, and by harassing doubts as to what fate had befallen him. She was not sure what her feelings were toward the Sieur Giraud, but she knew that his devotion to her was great, and she confessed to a strange leaping of her heart when he had so nobly agreed to aid her plans. Then, too, the letter she had read before Count Charles and the constable had thrilled her with its words of earnest regard, even under such circumstances as those in which she had been placed. She believed that had Count Charles and the constable not had other plans, she must have yielded to the plea of the Sieur Giraud.

In this wise the time passed with the Lady Agathe until the day Monseigneur arrived. Her windows gave not upon the street, but she heard the blare of the trumpets, the loud shouting and the tread of the great escort which had met him *en route*, and knew what it meant. It was then high noon, and she waited from then on in frantic suspense for the summons she knew would come. The day was nigh spent, however, before the page entered and delivered his message. Bidding the countess offer a prayer for her, she followed him from the room and down the winding stairs.

The duke reclined on a great dais heavily embroidered in gold, and above his white head drooped a gorgeous banner emblazoned with the Cross of St. Andrew. He had borne the journey by litter but badly, and there was little colour on his wrinkled face and exhaustion in his very attitude. At his side knelt Count Charles, Monseigneur's nearest hand being upon his head caressingly, and at the foot of the dais stood the Constable of France. This much the Lady Agathe might see ere she came to

her knee, and awaited, with bowed head, Monseigneur's pleasure.

He spoke quickly enough, but his voice was quavering with years and with his fatigued state.

"Rise, my Lady Agathe. We have been informed of the measures which my Lord Count de Charolais and my lord constable have deemed best for your welfare."

The Lady Agathe rose at his bidding and met the look his dark eyes bent upon her from beneath their shaggy brows.

"Also are we aware of the disobedience you have displayed or attempted to display," the duke proceeded, his tone showing his irritation. "This conduct amazes us; we should not have looked for it from you, my Lady Agathe."

After a moment's pause he seemed about to speak again, but whether the thought of what he would say left him, or whether he underwent a change of mind, he merely waved his hand in the end, and said:

"You may speak, my lady."

Both the Count de St. Pol and Count Charles turned their heads, and she saw naught to hearten her either in the former's cynical smile or the latter's challenging look. Yet she spoke—not with any boldness, for such would have been folly—with all the pent-up wish of her heart behind the words she uttered.

"Monseigneur ever has been just and kind to me, which emboldens me to voice my mind. The disposal which my lord count intends making of me; the marriage which my lord constable has suggested is so far distasteful, so far hateful to me, that I venture to appeal to Monseigneur against its fulfilment."

The duke looked at her sharply.

"And why this distaste; why this hatred, my lady?"

"Monseigneur, this man they would force me to wed I—I scarce know, save by sight."

"That will not suffice to condemn him, for we have seen Monsieur Vignolles, and there is much about him to please any lady, we find."

"I spoke not because of his manner or complexion, Monseigneur," she said hastily, "but because, for aught I know, he may be the veriest fool or knave that lives."

The duke roused angrily.

"Have a care, my Lady Agathe. You seem to forget who has made the arrangement," he cried testily. "My Lord Count de Charolais would scarce select either the fool or knave for you."

The words of the Countess de Laubec came back to her. In truth, the duke was well under Count Charles's thumb, as she had said.

"Your conduct has been and is very displeasing to us, my Lady Agathe," continued the duke. "My Lord Count de Charolais has been lenient in even waiting our approval before sending you to Bruges. As for your objections, they are paltry. Were we governed by women's whims, a fine pass the court would come to, forsooth! You protest that you know not the man. So be it true; that shall be remedied for you, since to-morrow you leave for Bruges under escort, and that escort under Monsieur Vignolles."

"Monsieur Vignolles!" she gasped.

"'Tis my Lord Count de St. Pol's suggestion, and, as it happens, an excellent one. You will have opportunity of making the acquaintance of your future lord *en route*," said the duke, and added, seeing that she stood speechless with the blow he had delivered:

"You may withdraw, my Lady Agathe. We have other pressing matters awaiting our attention."

Well she knew the futility of attempting further speech after that. Again she sunk to her knee before Monseigneur, and again her eye met the smile of the constable. Her blood ran hot within her with rage at this man, for it was clear to her that all the duke had said was his doing. To insure the constable's fidelity, Count Charles had ordered her marriage, lest, offended, he should turn his loyalty and allegiance to the King of France. She shuddered at sight of the constable's beaming features and at the thought that she was become a mere shuttle-cock in affairs of state. The next moment she was in the corridor without.

They had come a league without ever a word between them, yet he rode at her side, and his manner was easy enough. They had passed beyond the most distant outpost of the ever-increasing army, and the road lay crooked and dusty ahead of them; so crooked that but short stretches of it were visible at one time, and so dusty that the four men-at-arms who brought up the rear choked and coughed and swore feelingly under their breaths. Yet there was promise of relief from this last in the ominous masses of inky clouds which had begun to rear their heads over the hill-tops.

To say the truth, Monsieur Vignolles was more uneasy in mind than his bearing would have suggested. This duty of escorting his mate-to-be to Bruges had galled him exceedingly when the constable had informed him of it, yet he had submitted with seeming willingness. Long since he had learned the futility of opposing the constable's will. Therefore, here he was, a league on the road and with never a word to his charge, who rode with head up and eyes anywhere but where he might catch them with his own. It occurred to him that her

two women-servants, trundling behind in a cart, were enjoying the journey to better purpose than their mistress, despite the jolting they sustained. He judged that the time had come for breaking the barrier that separated the Lady Agathe and himself, for, since the thing had to be, he argued that there was small sense in making it worse. The high colour in the Lady Agathe's cheeks, the strands of golden hair that curled about her temples, the long lashes that half hid the blue of her eyes—these may have influenced Monsieur Vignolles to speak first, or they may have had nothing to do with it. Still, he was but a young and exceedingly healthy individual; so it is probable that these trifles were not without their effect. At all events, he did speak first, and his topic was that which it ever has been, since the creation of man, where embarrassment clogs free discourse.

"We shall have mud in place of this dust within an hour's time, my Lady Agathe. Did you see the flash pass between yonder two clouds?"

No answer.

He hitched in the saddle and tried again.

"There's a saying in my country that if you are quick enough to seize a lady's hand during a lightning flash she is bound to you for ever. I once heard of a man who was struck dead trying to discover if the saying was true, and just as he was about to grasp the lady's hand. He was counted a lucky man by those who knew them both."

No answer, but a perceptible throwing backward of the head.

"In truth, there is no doubt that he was fortunate, considering what he escaped," continued Monsieur Vignolles musingly.

This time the Lady Agathe replied, for she thought to see a ray of hope, yet she turned not her head.

"The man was favoured because he escaped wedding the lady?"

"Ay; for the lady afterward did away with four husbands, one after another—killed the first with kindness, and swore never to practise that again; second and third perished of the plague and neglect, and she was hung for poisoning the fourth. She was progressive, and, had she lived, might have accomplished more."

This was not precisely what the Lady Agathe had looked for, and she again took to silence. The distant grumble of thunder came to their ears, and already the air hung heavy with that dead stillness that precedes the summer storm.

Monsieur Vignolles fell back and, bidding one of the women hand him the Lady Agathe's cloak, again spurred forward and would have thrown it about her shoulders; but she drew away, and he could only place it on her hand.

"A truce to any attempt at gallantry, monsieur," she said. "It sets but ill on your present vocation."

"My present vocation is none of my making, my lady," he answered, and there was true resentment in his tone. "What my Lord the Constable ordains, that I do, and do quick enough, since protest would mean ruin."

"You mean that you would have avoided this duty?" she said, working herself into the cloak, for the heavens were becoming darker and darker.

He looked at her with almost reproach.

"Am I not obliged to marry you, my lady?" he asked. "By my faith, we shall see enough of each other

then, I'll be sworn; more than enough, 'tis likely, without this introduction."

"You would not wed were you not forced to it, monsieur?" she cried eagerly.

"Wed myself? Not to the best lady in the land, were she to beseech me thereto on bended knee; not to the most beautiful—which you are, my lady—did she shed tears of pleading upon my shoulder. Love them?—Ah, therein is another matter; but willingly tie myself to one—pooh, my lady, 'tis beyond me!"

"Yet you have calmly accepted this arrangement, monsieur," she said coldly. "Bah! You are a very coward!"

"In that I have obeyed my Lord the Constable's wishes, perchance I am in your eyes," he answered; "but in that I have braved the horrors of marriage, methinks the account balances; and I am simply what I am, a man with a great fondness for life."

"The Count de St. Pol would scarce have taken your life," she said.

"True; yet to withdraw his countenance would be enough. You know not these lords above us. Yet you do, for have you not had example in the fate of the Sieur Giraud."

"Ah! and what of him—what fate?" she gasped.

"Naught is known. He has simply disappeared from off the earth. That is the power these men wield, my lady; that is why I shall wed you."

Somehow his words did not give her the great joy they should have given. It is seldom gratifying to hear one's attractions set at naught, and the Lady Agathe was unaccustomed to it.

"You speak with too much assurance, monsieur," she said proudly. "Moreover, averse as you profess to

be toward this arrangement, there is a strange readiness in the manner of your submission."

For the fraction of a second Monsieur Vignolles's face wore a frown, and he seemed to meditate a sharp reply. But as he looked at her his irritation vanished and he laughed outright in her face, only to become grave again under the petulant glance she threw him.

"My Lady Agathe, in truth you give me too great credit," he said, and behind his apparent gravity there lurked a note of drollery; "for, alas! the very readiness of which you accuse me ever has been absent among my qualities. That a man should yield to circumstances which menace his fortunes, and his very life as well, proves, not his readiness, but his adaptability and common-sense. We shall get on better, my lady, if we meet our punishment with the proper spirit."

"With the proper spirit!" cried the Lady Agathe wrathfully. "*We* shall get on better!"

Her head tossed contemptuously, but he continued, without taking apparent notice:

"Let us look at the matter fairly. Count Charles and the constable, for reasons of their own, have decided on this match. That makes any say of ours superfluous. Self-destruction alone could set us free, and really, my lady, for myself, I think that unwarranted in the case. What is it that confronts us? Merely that you should ally yourself to one Monsieur Vignolles, a man of modest fortune, 'tis true, but with prospects of its betterment; a man whose person is at least not repulsive" (he paused to give an upward twirl to his moustaches), "and a man whom five and a score years have left with an infinite capacity for enjoying life."

"What allurements!" she said scornfully.

"Qualities, my lady; qualities only," he replied

quickly. "For myself, the penalty I pay is scarce greater. I am to renounce the pleasures of my present worldly state, thrust aside the charms of all womankind, and attach myself in all devotion to one of the most beautiful of her sex—for, indeed, you are very beautiful, my lady."

He bowed low over his pommel.

"And I find you of extreme ugliness, monsieur," said the Lady Agathe, knowing full well that her words were but the outcome of spite, since, as Monseigneur had said, there was much that was pleasing in Monsieur Vignolles's very youth and the way he bore himself. Moreover, she had not found any suitable rejoinder springing to her lips.

"A thousand thanks for your frankness, my lady," said he quickly. "Ugliness often enough becomes even pleasing with familiarity and is prone to be the partner of fidelity. Besides, it is well that we begin by being candid with each other, which leads me to say that there is a certain sourness in your manner of speech but ill comporting with your charming exterior, my lady."

She turned angrily upon him.

"And you would presume to pass upon my actions—*you!*" she exclaimed.

"'Tis but anticipating my future duty, my lady," he answered promptly. "Since you must share my name and fame, I would that I might point to you as a model of all the graces."

For a moment blind resentment kept her from replying. The first great drops, precursors of the flood behind, fell suddenly upon them as they rode onward, and Monsieur Vignolles drew his mantle from its saddle-fastening and, shaking it out, took refuge within its ample folds. As he did so the Lady Agathe spoke, and

he looked up quickly, for her tone, far from exhibiting the anger he had expected, was almost wheedling. He saw that evidently she had decided on another course.

"Monsieur Vignolles, if I have spoken harshly, it has been because I am scarce myself," she said. "You indeed may speak lightly of this marriage they would force upon us; you are a man and——"

"And, therefore, fearful of naught?" he inquired, while the rain came faster and faster and the play of lightning ever became more constant.

She paid no heed to his gibe.

"You are a man, and see it not in all its horror. But I am a woman, Monsieur Vignolles, and sooner than wed one whom I scarcely know, I will kill myself, even as you have suggested. Therein lies the difference in the way we regard it. You are not without some gallantry, monsieur. I beseech you, compel me not to such end."

"You know, my Lady Agathe, that what I do, I, too, am compelled to," he answered, for the pleading in her voice had reached his heart. "By my faith, ask of me any service that I may perform, and I swear——"

"Then I demand that you set me free ere we have gone another pace on this road to Bruges, Monsieur Vignolles. These men-at-arms, they will obey you; send them ahead on some pretext. Oh, I pray you let me go, sir! It can pass as an escape; arrange the manner of its accomplishment yourself. Only set me free with my women, for I would sooner wander the forest till death o'ertook me than advance farther along this road to living shame."

The downpour was now upon them. Though the hour was but mid-day, the darkness of evening had settled over the country, and the crash of thunder followed

hard upon the blinding flares in the leaden sky. Monsieur Vignolles pulled up shortly.

"We may, in truth, proceed no farther till the storm be ended, my lady," he said. "If we gain the ledge under yon overhanging bank, we shall have some shelter; your women may refuge beneath the cart," and with that he gave directions to the dripping men-at-arms to place blankets about the sides of the vehicle, so that a species of tent was arranged, wherein the women sought cover.

He then turned to the Lady Agathe.

"Come, my lady," he said, dropping from his saddle and proffering his shoulder, that she might dismount.

In another moment he was leading her rapidly up the bank by the roadside till they had reached the narrow ledge of which he had spoken. The men below dismounted to ease their beasts, and crept beneath the nearest trees, the helmets and breast and back plates of their armour reflecting the lightning in vivid patches amid the foliage.

Monsieur Vignolles spoke at once.

"My Lady Agathe, what you have asked is beyond me to grant. Had I but shown scruple or objection to my Lord the Constable's wish, 'twould have meant my ruin. Did I now permit your flight, not alone Luxembourg, but every province of France, would be forbid me. You know not the influence the Count de St. Pol holds with King Louis, even though he now does aid the House of Burgundy. Moreover, to turn you loose among these hills, infested as they are with the scum of the Ardennes, were but to have a hand in your death."

"Yet I would have it rather than——"

"Than have aught in common with the ugly Monsieur Vignolles," he cut in, with some return of his old man-

ner, yet quickly becoming serious enough. "By my faith, my lady, there are many who would agree with you, methinks, yet 'tis no question of likes or dislikes; and what would you have—that I should become a cast-out, hunted thing whom all men fear to shelter? Ha! My taste lies not that way, my Lady Agathe."

"Bah! You call yourself a man, Monsieur Vignolles, yet have thought only for yourself."

He winced, despite himself, beneath her contempt.

"I have in mind one other, who now wanders the land, stripped of all he once possessed. I forget not the Sieur Giraud, my lady," he said grimly.

"He, at least, would play a different part than the one you do, monsieur," she said proudly.

"He not only would, but did, play it differently, my Lady Agathe; with what result you have seen. I tell you again, and frankly, that if it were possible I would avoid this marriage as well as yourself; but I am no such fool as to dare either Count Charles or my Lord the Constable. I beg you speak no more of escape, for to Bruges I must see you safely."

His words were positive enough, and rang despair in her ears; yet he felt miserably in uttering them, and his heart was touched by her apparent grief. But Monsieur Vignolles had not spoken idle excuse, and knew that any trifling with his master's will meant worse than death to him. Moreover, he was young and full of the joy of living, and, to speak truly, the beauty of the Lady Agathe had visibly affected him.

Ere either of them might speak again the doleful hoot of an owl arose from among the trees across the roadway. In an instant a reply sounded sharp and clear above the downpour from the bank above their heads, and with it came the whir of an arrow's flight. Mon-

sieur Vignolles leaped from the shelter he had taken, to see the missile embed itself in the flank of one of the horses, which, according to custom, had been tied together by threes. Instantly the tortured animal was lashing out on all sides, setting the others to kicking in turn, and finally resulting in the whole six galloping off in confusion. From their retreat under the trees the men-at-arms came hurrying forth, their curses mingling with the shrieks that arose from beneath the cart, and went plunging through the heavy mud after their mounts.

"Stop, fools!" he roared, for 'twas in his mind that whence had come that arrow lay further trouble of greater import than the horses at the moment. But a crash of thunder made his cry less than a child's wailing, and the next moment they were gone.

"Stay where you are, my lady," he cried, when he could make himself heard, and, turning on his heel, went down the bank, his boots leaving a heavily ploughed trail behind him in the soft soil.

The women had thrust their heads forth in terror from beneath the dripping blankets, and he gruffly bade them keep out of sight. Then, ripping his sword from its sheath, he plunged headlong into the underbrush in the direction from which he judged the arrow had sped. As he did so two silent figures lowered themselves from the bank and crept upon the Lady Agathe, who had no eyes or ears for aught save the movements of Monsieur Vignolles. Nor did she awaken to her danger till sinewy hands held her helpless; a coarse gag was thrust into her mouth, and she was being deftly bound hand and foot.

"Well played, and sooner than we had looked for it, thanks to the storm," muttered one of her captors to the other.

The other grunted his assent, and the two, having secured the Lady Agathe to their liking, lifted her, and, between them, bore her quickly up the slope. As they scrambled over the top, Monsieur Vignolles met them not ten paces distant. He had seen no sign of an enemy within the wood, and having at last bethought himself of the Lady Agathe, had worked his way back toward where she had been left. With a loud cry he rushed upon them, his great sword aloft, and so taken by surprise were the two, that they let their burden slip to the ground and fled on either side into the wood. But he had seen the cruel gag in her mouth and made no attempt at pursuit, kneeling at her side and removing it with all gentleness.

"God grant you have suffered no hurt, my lady!" he said. "'Tis far north indeed for these knaves of Marcelle to be at work; but the range of that she-devil seems to know no limits."

"Marcelle! These were, then, her followers?" gasped the Lady Agathe, while he rapidly undid her bonds.

"Ay, for I recognised the villainous face of one of them who bore you, my lady. 'Twas the very rogue who did me the same office—Tite they call him."

So intent was he upon his work of releasing her, that it was her own sharp cry that caused him to whirl about and half rise. Too late! Ere he might gain his feet a rope settled about his neck and he was jerked flat upon his back. This time he had to do, not with two, but with a half-score foes, who seemed to have sprung from the earth. The struggle was short and sharp, but too unequal. In a moment he was gagged and bound as helplessly as had been the Lady Agathe.

At that instant there reached them the sound of the

men-at-arms returning; their loud voices and the thud of the recaptured horses' hoofs on the muddy road below. Monsieur Vignolles made frantic appeal with his eyes to the Lady Agathe, and, fearful of its success, two of the band left him and sprang toward her. Before they might lay hand upon her she had said quickly, checking them by something in her manner:

"No, Monsieur Vignolles, I shall not call. Rather than that, I will chance Marcelle the Mad. Such people have their price, and I will buy——"

But here a muttered oath from Tite, who sat astride Monsieur Vignolles, urged the men on, and they choked off her further utterance.

Back into the forest they were swiftly borne, doubling and turning till all trace of their direction was lost, even had there been any pursuit. At last they halted, and, under the dripping leaves, Tite and another set to work to fashion a kind of rude litter from saplings which they hacked down with their huge knives. When it was finished to their liking, the Lady Agathe was placed thereon; but before starting afresh Tite approached Monsieur Vignolles and severed his bonds, removing the gag as well. Nor did Monsieur Vignolles move, since the ready arrows of the others were turned toward him, and to shout now would have been folly.

"And now go, monsieur!" said Tite. "We have no wish for your company! Your sword we shall keep this time as a token—go!"

Monsieur Vignolles turned and seemed about to leave them, his head bent low upon his breast; but of a sudden he swung about and his glance sought the Lady Agathe, and, having met her look, he stood a moment in silence. Then Tite came before him and would have spoken, save that the other anticipated him and spoke first.

"So be it; I will go," he said quietly; "but 'twill be with you. Give the word, man!"

Tite growled angrily.

"That may not be, monsieur; I hold no instructions regarding you. Be off while you have the chance."

"I have said that I go with you," answered Monsieur Vignolles coolly, and unconsciously came near to the Lady Agathe, while Tite conferred aside with the others.

"Why—why do you do this, monsieur?" she said in a low tone. "Go—go while your life is safe, I pray you."

He smiled; his most heedless smile it was, and mock surprise was in his elevated brows.

"Go, my lady? And am I not, then, your affianced spouse? A fine figure I should cut, forsooth!"

She turned her head in anger, yet his determination to follow scarce displeased her. Willingly, in truth, she had chosen to face Marcelle rather than go farther on that road to Bruges; but she confessed that his presence would do much to relieve her fears.

Tite turned now and said:

"You may not go with us, monsieur; so speak no further thereon, but be off. There are those here who are for tying you to the nearest tree, as it is."

"Ay, ay!" was the general cry.

"Moreover, Marcelle——"

"I will answer to Marcelle," said Monsieur Vignolles. "This lady is, or was, under my protection; that is sufficient reason for my going."

"Not for me, monsieur; unless—unless the lady so desires it. My orders were to use all gentleness and attend her wishes so far as might be. You would like monsieur to accompany you, my lady?"

The Lady Agathe's gaze wandered from Tite to Monsieur Vignolles and there remained. Had she been able to tear from that look she would have said "No." She was conscious that his will was strong upon her—so strong that she writhed under its power; but she spoke quietly enough:

"Yes, I desire that Monsieur Vignolles accompany me."

"Enough!" growled Tite, and on a sign from him the litter was raised and the bedraggled party set forth again through the sodden forest on the long trip southward.

And in the rear, his fine attire plastered with mud, and the harsh welt of the rope still red upon his neck, strode Monsieur Vignolles. Ever and anon his gaze rested upon the fair head of the Lady Agathe before him, and as often he smiled strangely.

CHAPTER VII

MY LORD'S MESSENGER

WHAT strange motive had impelled Marcelle to send Tite and the others forth upon this errand which had resulted in the seizure of the Lady Agathe? She herself could scarce have told had one questioned her thereon, yet to her inner consciousness it was clear enough.

When she had fled like a startled fawn from the Sieur Giraud's side the idea had already flashed itself upon her mind. How far she had sped through the forest she knew not; but at length she had thrown herself down in the darkest of green recesses, and here, with the tears blinding her sight and great sobs convulsing her slight form, she had fought it out with herself. The Sieur Giraud had said that she might not understand, might not feel this mighty passion which, even as he had spoken, was rendering her distracted. Ay, and he had spoken to her in such tone of patronage as he might have used to a child. How could the man have stood so near her and yet not have felt the heart-ache she suffered, not heard her cry for one word of love—nay, even sympathy and understanding—from him? How could he have done so, forsooth? Because of that other, the Lady Agathe, who possessed his mind above all else in the world. And as she had thought of this, her small hands had clenched in fury, yet after a moment a strange quiet had crept over her, and again the thought that had been roused

within her had filled her mind. What manner of woman was this who could so hold a man to her memory; what charm did she possess which she, Marcelle, so sadly lacked? In truth, therein lay the secret of the Sieur Giraud's devotion; therein the quality which she would give her very life to attain.

And now she knew that the chance had been offered her of acquiring this knowledge, for the thought which had come to her was naught else than that of seizing the Lady Agathe as she journeyed from Namur. The more she conjured upon it, the more she was inclined thereto. Did she leave her to go on her way to Bruges, in truth, the woman would scarce be of further trouble to her, yet she knew that in such case the grief of the man, besides cutting her to the heart, would only too surely prevent his paying her a thought. He was scarce the sort who would turn from one woman to another for solace.

And so she had decided. She would have the Lady Agathe seized and brought before her; the proud head should humble itself before Marcelle, the despised thing of the hills, and face to face she would confront the woman who held the affections of the man she loved. The success of the plan should be assured—though its accomplishment meant a long march northward—for the country through which the Lady Agathe would travel was comparatively free of Companions, and a small escort would therefore be deemed sufficient.

The matter once decided, Marcelle felt that a great weight had been lifted from her mind. She started to rise to make her way back to the camp, but fell back quickly at the sound of voices in low discourse. Those who spoke were coming through the forest in her direction, and she crouched softly beneath the thick under-

growth that hedged in her retreat as with a wall. She was conscious of a redness about the eyes of which she would not have others of the band make note; she would wait till they had passed. But, alas for such plan! for, as they came opposite her, one spoke, and she marvelled to find it was a strange voice.

"By St. Hubert, I'll go no farther into the forest! Over five leagues have I ridden, with scarce a breath, and now you would march me through all the Ardennes, methinks. If this be no safe place for what we have to say, then are you fearful of your very shadow upon the leaves, man."

"Ay, 'tis safe enough here," answered the other quickly, and Marcelle started, for it was the voice of Crépin Brune. "Yet I do know the beaten paths through this wood better than you may, monsieur, and know as well when I have left them behind; but now may you speak freely. Last night word reached me from the old vine-grower, Meux, that you would come to-day; but, in truth, I see not why we meet here, rather than at his house, as before."

So Poncet's father had a hand in the meeting of Crépin and this stranger. Marcelle took an added interest in their talk.

"What I have to say is for your ears alone," answered the other. "Besides, my lord has taken some distrust of this old man Meux; but let us come to the point. We know, thanks to you, that the Sieur Giraud d'Orson now numbers himself among your company."

"Ay, curse him! But for him I should not still be striped with welts the size of your thumb!" replied Crépin sourly.

"In truth, he is held in higher favour elsewhere since Count Charles has been heard bitterly to bemoan his

loss," said the stranger. "Methinks that ne'er had he man about him so greatly in his trust, and would give much for his return, could his pride be overcome."

"To the devil with the Sieur Giraud! I came not here to listen to his praises; proceed with your business," growled Crépin, and the two seated themselves on the ground scarce two paces from Marcelle, yet so dense was her cover that she might not see them.

"The Sieur Giraud forms part of the matter in hand," replied the man; "but listen; that will appear. Count Charles has planned to reconnoitre the country for some three leagues from Namur two days hence. He will lead one party in person and will sweep the hills, while the Count de St. Pol brings his men up the valley along the river. The two forces will rendezvous at noon on the Great Bald Knoll, where the river makes a sharp bend to the right. You know the spot?"

Crépin grunted as though the question were too futile for words, and the stranger continued:

"From here they will return to Namur with such game as they may have bagged——"

"Little enough that will be," cut in Crépin. "But I see not the reasoning of all this, nor how it concerns the Sieur Giraud."

"Were my lord's designs for such as you to divine, they would scarce be worth the repeating; do but lend an ear, and hold your tongue till I be ended!" said the man sharply. "Since you know the place of rendezvous, that is enough, for there lies your work. You will know, as well, that the house of the old vine-grower, Meux, is not far removed therefrom."

"Scarce the range of a full bow, as the arrow would fall," answered Crépin, and added stubbornly, "But what of that, forsooth? That you meditate some move against

this cursed Charles of Burgundy I know well enough; but I am no fool to throw myself under the boar's tusks, much as I would hail his end."

"You are a fool, and over-fond of talk withal," cried the stranger, and rose in anger. "We shall find another and more tractable agent; one who will show the same readiness in performing his work as in grasping his pay, which first you do not, Monsieur Crépin."

"The devil! I am ready enough, man, if I see my way clear," answered Crépin, and there was much fear in his voice lest he lose the reward the other had adroitly suggested. "But, by my faith, I am not mad enough to set upon the Count de Charolais surrounded by a squadron of men-at-arms, which methinks you would propose!"

"Dolt, I said naught that could be so construed!" replied the man, while Marcelle felt herself tremble with the agitation his words had roused. "No one asks you to risk your precious skin, Monsieur Crépin; but what if Count Charles should be more bold and come alone to the house of our friend Meux? Would you then draw bow with steadier hand?"

"You speak madness; the man is bold enough, God knows, but——"

"The thing can be arranged. My lord has said so, and he is not given to idle dreams, Monsieur Crépin, and here the Sieur Giraud becomes of moment in the game. It is no secret that the slur cast upon Count Charles's birth by the fools of Dinant—your pardon, monsieur—gnaws consumedly at his heart. He will know no peace of mind till that be avenged in blood, and, most of all, he burns with craving for the life of that Gaspard Lenoir who led the rabble that night before the walls of Bouvignes."

"Ha, I may well believe that!" laughed Crépin.

"Then the rest will be plain to you," said the other shortly. "Here is this Gaspard Lenoir, whom Count Charles would give almost his hand to hold; there is the Sieur Giraud, who would hesitate at naught to make his peace with his old master. Equip the Sieur Giraud with some knowledge of Gaspard Lenoir—some certain power by which he can place him in Count Charles's hands—and—the result is plain enough."

"But the Sieur Giraud knows naught of Gaspard Lenoir," cried Crépin.

"Therefore it is for you to inform him," replied the stranger.

"Not I! I would be torn to pieces by the band or by any of the thousands of Companions," cried Crépin. "Moreover, I know little of the man myself, though once I heard him speak before the people."

"It is not that you shall say anything true of the man Lenoir, anything that shall put him in danger. We care not for the man's life, so be it he serves our purpose. Inform the Sieur Giraud that you know the man, can arrange for his capture, and that you will turn him over to him, provided he swears to reward you later and afford you his protection. He will see naught in it save your greed of gain, and will promise, I'll be sworn. The trick will serve, for the man is desperate and will do anything to retrieve his fortunes."

"Well; and then?" said Crépin, with some show of eagerness.

"Then there remains but to induce him to write Count Charles, advising him of what he knows—or thinks he knows—of this Gaspard Lenoir, and begging for a chance of speaking with him. With this will end the Sieur Giraud's part."

"End his part!" said Crépin stupidly.

"Ay; and much thanks shall we owe him," answered the other. "The postscript which shall carry the real meat of the letter shall be my task, and, in truth, I will have lost my cunning if, with a copy of the man's hand before me, I may not make it seem the work of one. My lord chooses those who serve him with some care, Monsieur Crépin. Be at ease; Count Charles will go to the vine-grower's house on the morrow."

"Perchance, with threescore or more at his back," sneered Crépin.

"He will go alone. What has he to fear from the Sieur Giraud? The man may have been guilty of meddling with women, as the report is, but otherwise he never had swerved in his loyalty. Besides, pride runs in no man stronger than in the Count de Charolais, and he fain would have no common topic made of this Gaspard Lenoir and his work at Bouvignes. In his presence none dare mention it."

"But he will soon see the trick," persisted Crépin. "The Sieur Giraud will not be there and——"

"And you will, Monsieur Crépin," cut in the stranger. "You will be there—in the thicket at the side of the path leading to the door. If you get him not, then—but faith, man! Even mail may not withstand full bow at three paces, and two hundred golden crowns should serve to make you hold steady. This is the work I bring you from my master, Monsieur Crépin. In other ways it might be accomplished, yet with some danger of his hand showing in it. Come; what say you?"

"By my faith, 'twould please me much to make an end of this 'Charlotel'!" cried Crépin. "And serve to make me the greatest of all among these hills. I'll do

it, monsieur. I'll be in the thicket at the vine-grower's at noon two days hence. Do you but attend to your share as well."

"And the letter?" asked the other.

"Ay, and I will get the letter from the Sieur Giraud," responded Crépin, rising, "save he suspect me, which I scarce fear, for I shall have a tale to tell him of Gaspard Lenoir that shall do me credit. Do you wait where I first met you, near the dead oak, and it shall be in your hands soon."

He paused a moment; then, drawing near to the other, said shrewdly:

"Yet I would know the name of this master you serve; this one you call 'my lord,' for——"

"That you shall not, Monsieur Crépin," answered the man; "for to tell you would mean my death did it reach my lord's ears. Two hundred crowns in gold you shall have if you succeed; but none of your meddling. The offer is fair, and here are a score as warranty of our faith. Take the task or leave it for some other, as you will."

But Crépin had already pounced upon the gold, and Marcelle heard its chink as it passed into his hands.

Without another word the two parted and stole away silently through the forest.

Marcelle lay motionless, but with wide-staring eyes, until they should be far from earshot; then with a bound leaped to her feet and glided off like a shadow among the trees.

As she approached the camp, the "tap, tap" of a hammer upon metal greeted her ears, and a moment later she came upon Tite, who sat apart from the others, busily engaged in fashioning a rough sheet of brass he had somehow acquired into some semblance of a dish.

The old man would revert to the calling which once had meant his livelihood even in this wild life he now led. At sight of him there returned to her with all its force the decision she had taken, and she beckoned him aside. Their talk lasted till the evening shadows were merging into gloom and the camp fires, from a sickly yellow, flared redly, for Tite raised many objections to her wishes. At length, however, he nodded grimly, and, making his way through the men, touched here and there one whom he bade follow him, till some half-score were at his heels. By his direction these waited only to help themselves generously from the camp kettle, and, having eaten hurriedly, seized their bows and slipped away with him into the growing darkness. With a long tramp before him, Tite preferred being on the spot first and resting afterward.

Marcelle watched them go with a fierce joy in her heart, yet it was a joy much tempered by the uneasiness which the words of Crépin and the stranger had given her. She knew now that there was some one in Count Charles's own following—some one of position, since the man had called him "my lord"—who desired the count's death even as much as any of those about her. Who this was she made no attempt to guess, yet believed it to be one who worked at the behest of King Louis, for he would give much to know that the bane of his ambitions had been removed.

The uneasiness that Marcelle felt was not in any sense due to any compunction. She believed with all her heart that the death of the Count de Charolais would accomplish more for her people than aught else might, yet she had shuddered at hearing these cold-blooded plans for its accomplishment. Also the manner of Crépin's playing the spy and becoming the tool of others

without her knowledge served to enrage her beyond bounds. Yet, in truth, the man had done naught which the Companions would not applaud, and, were his intent successful, would, indeed, be hailed as a saviour.

She walked slowly within the circle of light, her head upon her breast and her mind deep in thought. Petite Maman and the other women ceased their noisy chatter, and Poncet addressed her some question concerning Tite's mission, but she seemed not to hear, and, as she raised her head, her eyes travelled swiftly among them until they rested upon the figure of the Sieur Giraud. He sat aloof from the rest, but even as she looked he rose, and she saw that he held in one hand a folded bit of parchment. Crépin, then, had not failed.

Poncet had followed Marcelle's gaze with his own, and now, thinking to see an opportunity for merriment, leaped to his feet and, pointing to the Sieur Giraud, derisively cried:

"Ho, you there, Petite Maman, and you, Bonne Fleuron, you who be past-mistresses in the ways of love, what think you of a man who, having ruined himself for a woman, would still tempt fate? Regard yon love-sick face of the Sieur Giraud and the letter freshly composed to—well, whom think you, the same or another? and, if another, which of you has supplanted the first wench?"

Poncet's tone indicated that he himself loved them all and waited their answer in agonised suspense, and was greeted with a wild burst of laughter.

"Do you let the man alone!" cried Petite Maman, for the Sieur Giraud was liked for what he was not by these women. "When he meddles in your affairs 'twill be time enough——"

The sentence was never ended, for the Sieur Giraud

had come quietly to the side of Poncet and, holding him with something in his eye, seemed to meditate a retort. An instant later his jaw shut sharply on the speech and he knocked Poncet flat upon his back. Nor was Poncet fully aware what had occurred until well-nigh a half-hour afterward. And then the Sieur Giraud stood there waiting for the others whom he looked to set upon him; but there was no move made, and the truth was that he had made a greater stride in the company's favour with that blow than he knew. They could not understand the sentiment which had led the Sieur Giraud to his present state; but they were all at heart with a man who could deal such blow in squaring an offence. It had been workmanlike. As for the women, they screamed their approval in shrill tones.

At last the Sieur Giraud turned and caught Marcelle's eye upon him.

"Your pardon for such scene, but, in truth, it could scarce be helped," he said, and smiled.

"I know; I have heard," she answered quietly, and then, as by chance, "But where is Crépin? I had thought to find him here, and——"

"He was here within the half-hour, and left, saying that he would return shortly," said the Sieur Giraud quickly. "I know not what should have taken him off in such haste, especially as he but waited for me to have ended——"

He checked himself suddenly.

"That letter?" said Marcelle, and moved a little aside from the others, so that he must follow.

He bowed his assent, for denial would have been useless after the way he had betrayed himself; then added in a low tone:

"Marcelle, I came to you disgraced, dishonoured, a

driven thing before all the world. You saved me from the death I welcomed, and in return I pledged myself to follow you and you alone during your pleasure. If by any chance my old station could be restored me, would you release me from my word?"

She now was certain from his earnestness that Crépin had indeed raised the dying ambition in the man.

"Release you? Why should I do so?" she asked sharply. "We are well content with your services; do you try to be content with your lot, Sieur Giraud. But methinks there is some connection between your request and this letter, as you speak of them in the same breath, and you make use of strange messengers, since Crépin is so favoured."

He made no reply, but involuntarily thrust the parchment within his belt. As for Marcelle, she longed to put an end to this indirect and false talk and do this man she loved a real service by informing him of the base use to which he was being put. Yet to do so meant that she should ruin the cherished wish of those who looked with all confidence to her for guidance; meant that she, of all others, should step in to save the life of him they execrated, the Count de Charolais. And, as though this were not enough, it meant that the Sieur Giraud, oath or no oath, would for ever pass out of her life, for she well knew that, did he suspect this conspiracy, never would he remain a moment with them. No; this must not be; she could not bear it now. Crépin must be left a free hand.

And as though in answer to her thought, Crépin himself parted the brush at the side and, looking swiftly about, saw them and strode in their direction. Fearful lest the stranger might depart, he had been to beg him wait yet a little while. The Sieur Giraud had needed

much convincing. As he came forward, the Sieur Giraud looked up quickly and said, as though he had fought the matter out and was decided enough:

"Your terms were more harsh than I thought at the time, but I warn you, Marcelle, that I, who ne'er yet have broken my word, will have small regard for it if——"

Again he checked himself. In truth, it seemed that the rising hope within him was robbing him of all discretion.

"You speak strangely of a return to your former condition, Sieur Giraud," said Marcelle. "I warn you, in return, that any attempt of yours to re-enter the service of the Count de Charolais would mean your death; and that you know, as well." And then, with a little laugh and shrug of the shoulders, as though his words had been too futile for consideration, she added, "Yet I will promise you such relief as you may gain from that letter."

The next moment, as Crépin came up, she turned to join Petite Maman and the others grouped round the fire. The Sieur Giraud even smiled at her last words. Little she knew, he thought, of what his letter conveyed, else had she already brought him face to face with the wrath of the band, the wrath that would wreak a terrible vengeance on any who should dare hunt down this Gaspard Lenoir. It had been a close matter, and he wiped a drop of sweat from his brow.

Marcelle, looking up for an instant, beheld Crépin disappearing into the wood, and caught the white flutter of something in his hand against the green background. Then he was gone.

CHAPTER VIII

AFTER THE STORM

THE same storm which had so pitilessly descended upon Monsieur Vignolles and the Lady Agathe had swept along the river valley and passed with shattering force away to the southward, over the Ardennes hills. Where its path had been, many a shivered tree-trunk swayed yellow and creaking in the after-gale, dread witnesses of the omnipotence of Heaven. For three hours the rain had lasted, with a downrush that threatened to wash the Companions bodily out from nature's refuges—the caverns in the cut banks—where they had taken shelter.

Now that the tempest had passed on, and only the distant grumble of thunder remained of all the tumult, they came crawling from their retreats like so many rabbits when the dogs have swept past.

Turbid yellow torrents now filled the stream beds where before had been only dry boulders; great fresh gashes were gouged in the hillsides, telling scars of the flood that had been, and over all was the pervading smell of damp earth and the moist fragrance of the dripping pines. Yet it is doubtful if any note of all this was made by those who came forth into the light of day. Other affairs occupied their minds to the exclusion of all else.

Before the storm had broken upon them, the Sieur Giraud had reported the approach of another band of Companions, a band with which they had had many pre-

vious skirmishes, and who were wont to trespass on what the followers of Marcelle deemed their territory by force of possession and might. The invaders had succeeded in making off with André Vaucler, and the Sieur Giraud had barely escaped them. Now there was but one thought in all their minds—to fall upon these marauders ere they might recover from the drenching they had endured. André Vaucler must be retaken and these fools taught a lesson they would never forget. So fought these outlaws of the Ardennes among themselves with all the weapons that bitterness and treachery could suggest, united though they were in their common hatred of the Bishop of Liège and the Burgundian faction.

And now they would have none but the Sieur Giraud at their head. He it was who had barely missed capture himself, and so he should lead them to the spot. Nor was he loath to accept the office. He had done his best to save André, through no great love of the man, it was true, but because of that spirit which renders a man prompt to fight against odds at all times. Moreover, he was nursing a flesh wound of one arm, where an arrow had grazed it, and was in fit mood for the undertaking. Marcelle, therefore, had made no protest to his selection, and, in truth, there had been much of pride in the look with which she had watched him go. She took it as a sort of unwitting approval of her love for the man.

Thus the camp had been almost stripped of Companions. She had kept Crépin and some half dozen others, the former because she now preferred to have an eye on his movements; the latter, in case any trouble should have befallen Tite and he should send for assistance. That the Sieur Giraud would not accomplish all he set out to do never entered her head for a moment.

Two hours passed, and the afternoon was drawing to an end, when Tite stole like a shade from the wood and approached the rude cabin the Companions had set up for their leader. Marcelle had been on the watch, and met him before the low portal.

"You have failed, Tite?" she said quietly.

"Had I done so, I should not have come back, Marcelle," he answered, "for methinks the success of the business meant much to you. They wait below. I would not have them march into camp till I saw that all was well."

"Right, as you always are, Tite," she said kindly, and with relief in her voice. "How fares the lady? There was no—no accident?"

"Your wishes were enough to insure against that, Marcelle. There was no accident, unless bringing you more than you bargained for may be called such, for, besides my lady, I have gathered in once more that Monsieur Vignolles."

"Monsieur Vignolles! And why——"

"He was in charge of the escort, and, after we stampeded them, 'twas his wish to accompany us. By my faith, 'twas none to my liking, and I would have settled that quick enough, only my lady desired him to come as well."

Marcelle mused for a moment, then said:

"And you did right to humour her, Tite, though I perceive not the meaning of it. One would have expected him to take any other course than coming here after his last experience. However, let them be brought hither."

With that, Tite vanished again into the forest, but his step, now that he was relieved of care, was heavy with the fatigue of his long journey. Marcelle stood a

moment looking after him; then, slipping into the cabin, threw a string of black beads about her neck and pushed her disordered hair back from her brow—why, she could scarcely have told. The next moment she was again outside, awaiting their coming, and, as she so stood, Crépin approached her, his mean features betraying much excitement.

"Yonder—at the bottom of the gorge—Tite and Poncet and the rest, and with them a woman and one other, Marcelle!" he gasped. "From the fork of the great dead oak I saw them as they came up the valley."

Marcelle nodded.

"I knew," she said coolly, whereat Crépin's face fell at the knowledge that he was anticipated.

"You know? Then 'twas you who——"

"I know, because I have seen Tite," she said sharply. "As for you, Crépin, I thank you for having your eyes open, but this is my affair; take heed lest you meddle with it."

"Your affair, is it?" he growled. "And what is your affair is ours—is mine, methinks. If I know aught of dress, these two will have well-filled purses; but who are they, since you have so managed—your affair?"

There was a distinct sneer in his tone that caused her to turn on him suddenly.

"Crépin Brune, since we have all been together, ne'er have I had aught apart from the rest, ne'er have I taken share for share with you of what we have laid hands on; but this is different, and for this once I will have free hand alone. You are too much given of late to interference, and for it you already have felt the lash. Oppose me further and I swear to you I'll have you fairly flayed alive; that is my answer, and bear you it well in mind."

"Then we're to have naught from these two?" he asked sullenly, his face lowering with the passion he dared not give vent to.

"We shall see," she answered; "perhaps naught, perhaps much, but never more nor less than I say. This, I repeat to you, shall be my affair and mine alone."

Crépin made no reply, but shrugged his shoulders in sulky fashion, and even as he did so Tite and his party emerged from the trees and came toward them.

The Lady Agathe had forsaken the litter for the climb up the hillside, and had drawn her kirtle close about her doe-skin riding-boots as she came through the wet grass. Her face bore witness to the great fatigue she felt, yet she carried her head proudly erect and seemed to seek whither she was being led. Monsieur Vignolles followed close in her footsteps, his great boots heavy with mud and his furred mantle thrown carelessly over one arm. His expression would equally have befitted a man returning from the hunt and one marching to the gallows, yet his eye, beneath this apparent mask, sought what might lie ahead, precisely as did the Lady Agathe's.

Marcelle made no move as they came toward her. To say the truth, she felt as though turned to the wood of the forest about her, yet she trembled slightly as she noted the grace of the Lady Agathe's carriage and saw the proud beauty of those blue eyes under the golden sheen of her hair, which now fell in some disorder from her head-dress. She saw, as well, the soaked garments that clung heavily about the Lady Agathe's figure, and was one moment overjoyed at seeing her discomfort, the next impelled to sympathy. But not for the world would she have advanced to meet this woman—this other! No; the Lady Agathe should be made to feel that here, in

these Ardennes, she was of less consequence than the least of them all. She should beg, humbly beg, such favours as she desired from her, Marcelle. Then, perchance, would she deign to grant her requests.

Thus came these two women face to face; the one, tall, slender, and fair as the very sunbeams themselves, which, now the storm had ended, threw their departing and straggling rays into this green arbour; the other, so slight as to suggest frailty, and dark as the shadows of the densest thicket near at hand. Nor did either of them speak for some space, being occupied with mutual regard. The Lady Agathe marvelled at coming upon such a beautiful creature in the midst of such surroundings, and Marcelle, as she looked upon the other, felt her heart sink. Surely no man, once loving her, could be aught than constant.

It was the Lady Agathe who first roused herself and spoke. Alas for her, and for the manner she saw fit to adopt!

"You, then, are that woman of the hills, Marcelle the Mad, of whom I have heard so much?"

"I am Marcelle the Mad," answered Marcelle coldly, and, motioning the others to draw back some paces, turned abruptly on her heel and faced Monsieur Vignolles.

"So we meet again, monsieur, and this time, I am told, by your own choosing; a strange procedure, in truth."

"My lady journeyed this way, mademoiselle," he answered with a bow; "and as, on my last visit here, I remembered to have left behind, through inadvertence, something of value—to wit, my purse—I gladly seized upon the opportunity of company."

Despite her trouble, the Lady Agathe could not

restrain a smile of admiration at the man's coolness. Now, indeed, she felt thankful that he had come with her, yet fearful for the consequences to him.

"You may find it no matter for jesting, Monsieur Vignolles," said Marcelle.

"Nor have I so found it, mademoiselle," he replied seriously enough. "I am but a poor man, and the loss has fallen heavily upon me."

"Call me no more mademoiselle; reserve such airs for those who may be pleased therewith," cried Marcelle, with a perceptible hoist of the shoulder nearest the Lady Agathe. "Here, where I rule, I choose to be only Marcelle; let that suffice. But methinks you wore no such bold aspect when last you were here, monsieur, and the empty sheath at your side would be enough to give your words the lie. If e'er I saw a man in dread fear at heart, you are that one."

For a moment he seemed to meditate a light rejoinder; then his glance, falling on the Lady Agathe, in whose face was a real anxiety, lest he make matters worse, he said simply:

"By my faith, the man who would think to hide his thoughts from any woman would deserve the worst of the Fates! You are right, Marcelle. If 'tis not fear that causes the trembling of my hand, 'tis, at least, suspense."

There was not the slightest tremor in the hand he held toward her, but his tone was sincere, and Marcelle's attention had been drawn for a moment by the chattering arrival of the women of the camp, who had just learned of the new arrivals and driven hither pell-mell. A gesture from her served to quiet them, and they grouped themselves behind Tite and the others.

"Since you have decided upon the truth, I ask

you again, why have you come here?" said Marcelle sharply.

"And in all truth I will answer, madem—Marcelle," he replied quickly. "For one reason, I came because my lady, there, might, perchance, take some comfort in my presence; for another, because to have returned to Namur with my tale was not to be thought of. And now, that we may save time and trouble, here is my purse —'tis my Lord the Constable's gold, so the spending should be pleasing enough—and here am I."

With that, he extended the purse to Marcelle, and she, making no move to take it, he let it fall at her feet, and, folding his arms, half-turned upon the others.

"You may kill a man who comes to you of his own will with such gift, but methinks 'twould lack the true savour of sport," he said, and then turned again to Marcelle. "But what I would know is, why you have seized my lady, and what mischief you mean to her."

And now Marcelle understood that the man's fear which she had detected was, in truth, not for himself, but for the Lady Agathe. Something within her warmed to him, and a startling thought flashed upon her. Was it possible that Monsieur Vignolles might have greater regard for the Lady Agathe than the Sieur Giraud had led her to believe? In truth, no man would willingly place his life in jeopardy for the mere whim of a woman. She felt her heart leap within her at the thought. One thing was certain, Monsieur Vignolles must be close-kept till she knew. Perchance he would prove the very weapon she needed.

What the Lady Agathe thought as Monsieur Vignolles spoke was too confused a jumble to admit of any clear understanding. Monseigneur had not erred in saying they might become better acquainted on that

journey, yet she felt that she knew less of the man with his every action. At one moment he betrayed a frivolous lightness; at the next, rose to a height that compelled her regard. She was in a very perplexity of uncertainty, and, moreover, was greatly vexed at Marcelle's complete ignoring of her since she had first spoken.

Marcelle spoke to Monsieur Vignolles quickly enough, for her thoughts had been fleeting.

"You are wise in changing your manner, monsieur. As for the gold"—she touched it with her small foot—"we shall, indeed, find use for that; and, for yourself, no present harm shall befall you, provided always you try no tricks."

She called Tite to her side.

"Tite, you will answer to me for this man's keeping. Let him never be out of the sight of two of the men, and quarter him by night in your own cave firmly secured. Away with him now, that he may become used to it. That is all you have to fear at present, monsieur," she added.

"But, my lady?" cried Monsieur Vignolles, as Tite beckoned him to follow.

"The Lady Agathe will fashion her own lot," she answered in a low voice. "As with you, it will depend upon her conduct alone. Now, go! I will speak with her."

With a last look at the Lady Agathe, he followed Tite and the half-dozen who joined him, and was swallowed up in the deepening shadows. But, as he did so, a sigh of relief escaped him, for he now was certain that the Lady Agathe had been seized for ransom. Marcelle had meant as much by that allusion to her fate lying in her own hands. Was she prepared to pay compliantly and generously, then would she soon be free. So thought

Monsieur Vignolles, and his heart was glad within him, so that he paid little heed to the change which had come over his fortunes, great though that change was.

Of the men, Crépin and several others remained to see the outcome of Marcelle's talk with the Lady Agathe, and the women crowded them, in their eagerness, a little closer. Not often had it been given these outcasts to look upon one of the Lady Agathe's station at such close range, and they would make the most of their opportunity. Marcelle was impelled to order them back, but was checked by the thought that the other might construe such action as a favour. Therefore she turned to the Lady Agathe and said shortly:

"Now that Monsieur Vignolles is disposed of, I will speak with you. You are not pleased with the position in which you find yourself?"

She found a certain enjoyment in teasing this haughty lady before her.

"Your question is not deserving of reply," was the answer. "Since I assume that I shall be forced to remain here some time, I would, for the present, ask the favour of drying myself at some fire. Then I will discuss terms with you, woman."

In truth, now that the sun had set, the woodland breeze was chill enough, and the Lady Agathe shivered in her soaked raiment. But, again, there had been that unfortunate tone of patronage or condescension in her voice that killed the sympathy her plight might have roused.

"I dare swear you'll grow used to the rigours of our life ere many days, my lady," said Marcelle. "You are cold? Bah! How often think you have I lain down in clothing wet as yours, when to make any fire meant bringing the very wolves from whom you come down

upon us, ay, and slept, too, though with the chills shaking the very pine branches beneath me?"

"You have chosen the life you lead, woman, and the recital of its hardships has no bearing upon my own case," said the Lady Agathe coldly.

"You lie in saying that, woman!" cried Marcelle. "Ay, if you may fling 'woman' at me, as you would to the lowest menial under you, so shall you have it back. Here, in the hills, I am as free as you to speak my mind —freer, if it comes to that—and you lie when you say that I have chosen this life. Chosen it? Are you blind, that you see not it has been forced upon me—upon these others here—by the tyranny of such as you spring from? But no; you are not blind; you could see if you would. It is that you cared not, so be it your own pampered wishes were fulfilled, and a half-score vied with each other to perform your slightest bidding. What cared you for the rain that drives us, like so many rats, into our holes, save that it clashed with some idle jaunt you had planned? What recked you of the cold that pierced through the rags we wore—ay, and left some gaps among us that ne'er may be refilled—you, with your comforts and your ease, and the warmth of a fire at your back? And you would speak to me as though you lowered yourself in so doing; *you!*"

She ended with a contemptuous shrug of the shoulders and an angry stamp of her foot. As for the Lady Agathe, she was completely upset by this outburst of rage, and believed that the woman was indeed mad, as she chose to call herself. Therefore, she would humour her by returning to the subject of her ransom. Surely, even a madwoman would appreciate that.

"I know not why you should accuse me of being the cause of your troubles and your life—" she began.

"I said not that you were," interrupted Marcelle, "but 'tis your cursed party that has brought us to what we are, and you are none to use such tone to me, nor will I stand it from you."

"So be it; but let us come to a subject we may hope to agree upon. You have taken me for ransom, I suppose?"

Marcelle made no answer. In truth, what other reason was she to give? Let the Lady Agathe think so for the present, at all events.

"Then what sum will content you? I am rich, and will pay what you ask, only set me free."

Crépin, who had stolen nearer than the others, pricked up his ears to catch the reply from Marcelle's lips.

The question was plain enough, and called for a straight answer, yet Marcelle hesitated. Not only had she given this phase of the matter no thought, but she felt that now, if ever, she must temporise. It was true that her caprice to see this woman who held the devotion of the Sieur Giraud had been gratified, yet she would know her further; she would observe her day by day, that she might learn the charm she possessed. At present, save for the Lady Agathe's undeniable beauty and fairness, she had seen naught that should so captivate a man. Then, too, the unexpected coming of Monsieur Vignolles had introduced a fresh element into her perplexity. She would know how far his devotion extended; that she was resolved upon. There was, then, no other course but to temporise. But one scruple was in her mind at doing this: the fact that the Sieur Giraud would believe she had used the knowledge gained from him for such a base purpose as seizing the Lady Agathe for gold. But better that than that he should suspect

the real cause. She raised her black eyes slowly till they met the blue ones of the Lady Agathe.

"The price of your release rests not with me alone," she said. "Moreover, your manner of speech has roused a fancy within me—a fancy to extend to you the hospitality of the Ardennes. You have never thought of the life we vagabonds of the hills lead, save with contempt—save with a shudder of loathing; but you shall know for yourself the other side of the picture you thought to understand. From to-night the Lady Agathe, for a time, ceases to exist—dress, pride, all shall be cast behind you—and you shall roam these hills as one of us, enduring our trials, ay, and sharing our pleasures. To-night you shall become one of the Companions of the Green Tent; you shall wear the badge of Marcelle the Mad. It is my will."

For a moment the Lady Agathe was struck dumb with amazement; then her anger burst forth.

"And think you for a moment I will don the dress of your murderous company of thieves, woman? Then are you more mad than they say of you. Richly will I reward you for freedom, but——"

"You are a fool, Agathe," cut in Marcelle shortly. "As you are obeyed in your own household, so rule I here."

"Agathe!" gasped that lady.

"Ay, for such you are become—Agathe, plain Agathe—unless you would choose some other name more to your liking," responded Marcelle, and, turning, called, "Petite Maman and you, Bonne Fleuron, you who are skilled with the needle, do you equip this woman with raiment such as I myself wear. The velvet taken from the bishop's man will do excellently. Let it be finished and ready for wear in the morning." Again she turned to

the Lady Agathe. "There is my cabin, which now you will share with me. You will find a fire, needing but a dry stick or two, at the far end, Agathe."

With that, she turned on her heel and, picking up the purse of Monsieur Vignolles, walked rapidly away.

"But, woman, you cannot be so mad as to refuse the gold I offer you," cried the Lady Agathe. "I care not what the amount be, only name it and——"

But Marcelle had disappeared into the forest. With a choking sob rising in her throat, despite her efforts to be brave, the Lady Agathe started slowly for the portal of the cabin. There was no rift of light through the gloom of her despair. Petite Maman and the others laughed harshly as they noted this, and departed to their quarters to begin upon the velvet. It had been good to them to see Marcelle humble this proud lady.

Of a sudden the Lady Agathe felt a touch on the arm, and, turning her head, beheld Crépin standing at her side. She recoiled at the leer in his eye.

"My lady spoke of gold," he said eagerly. "If she is willing to pay well, she need not look to Marcelle alone for release."

"You mean?"

"I would first know where my lady would go," he answered.

"There is now but one refuge for me—Dauphiné—Dauphiné," she said, and drew back from him.

Crépin whistled softly.

"A long journey, my lady, yet it might be done if—what would my lady give to reach Dauphiné?"

Despite the man's cunning look, his very words gave her a thrill of hope for a moment.

"One—two—five hundred golden crowns," she cried; "anything to leave this accursed forest behind me."

Crépin smiled gleefully.

"For five hundred golden crowns I would see you safely to hell, my lady," he said, not noting that she shrank farther from him at his words, so great was the fortune opening before his mind. "Ay; I and two others will take you this very night—within the hour. By break of day we may be leagues on our way."

"And who—who are you?" she gasped, eyeing him closely.

"Crépin is the name I go by, but that matters not," he replied. "Ha! We shall see, Marcelle, whether I be flayed alive. We shall see if ever again I suffer the lash while the rest look on and laugh, and the Sieur Giraud——"

"Sieur Giraud!"

The Lady Agathe was upright enough now.

"Ay, the Sieur Giraud, curse him! He it was who first——"

"And he is here; he is in the camp?"

Crépin paused and looked at her curiously, then said:

"He is not in camp at present, but he is here with us. Ay, now I do remember that he must be known to you, since he came to us from Namur; but what has that to do with it? In an hour's time I will come for you. All will be at supper, and we may steal away unnoticed."

The Lady Agathe shook her head.

"No, I will not go with you; but—but I swear you shall be rewarded if you obtain me speech with the Sieur Giraud d'Orson, my man."

In an instant Crépin's joy had turned to blind rage, as he saw the expected fortune vanishing into air—and always, always was it this Sieur Giraud who came between him and the execution of his will.

"I tell you, the Sieur Giraud can do naught for you," he said fiercely. "It is I, alone, who can get you safely away. What would you have him do that I, another Companion, may not?"

"The Sieur Giraud a Companion—one of your company? I do not believe it. He is a man of honour."

Crépin sneered almost in her face.

"Of so much honour that, to save his life, he took the oath that binds him to us during our pleasure," he said mockingly. "Come, my lady, be sensible. I offer you freedom. I confess openly 'tis for the gold you will give in return. Would you trust the Sieur Giraud, who sells his very self, farther than you would me?"

"Farther?" cried the Lady Agathe. "Farther? Why, man, now that I've heard you speak, I wouldn't trust you at all. No; rather would I place my faith in Marcelle herself, for there is knavery writ large in every line of your face. As for the Sieur Giraud, I believe no word of what you have said against him. And now take yourself off ere I summon Marcelle or some one who will know how to deal with such a traitor as you are."

The man's face was livid with rage.

"Fine words, my lady," he cried. "So you believe no word against the Sieur Giraud? How chances it, then, that he is even now out in the hills fighting another band of these Companions you so despise? I tell you, the man has become, not only a Companion, but a very chief of our band—as great a one as Tite himself."

"Go!"

"I'll go when I have ended," he hissed, blind with the fury within him. "The Sieur Giraud, a man of honour, forsooth! Do men of honour conspire against

the lives of those they have served and those who have befriended them? Listen, then, that you may know. On the morrow Count Charles de Charolais comes forth with some of the army from Namur. This Sieur Giraud, of whose honour you prate, by a note giving false information, has lured him to a spot where he will meet his death."

"Murder!" gasped the Lady Agathe.

"So they will call it, these Burgundians," said Crépin, with an ugly laugh. "So much for the honour of your Sieur Giraud d'Orson, my lady."

"And not enough by a whole book, since it rests on the word of such a cur!" she cried.

From below in the valley arose the hoot of an owl. Crépin started.

"Ah, 'tis Poncet's call, if I know aught of Poncet, and he went with the Sieur Giraud!" he cried. "The truth of what I say need not rest upon the word of a cur, then, for yonder returns the Sieur Giraud and his men. Come, my lady; you shall see with your own eyes."

Rapidly he led the way through the trees, and, trembling and dazed, she followed him, for there was something in her heart that compelled her to refute his word, if she might. In a moment they came out upon a ledge overlooking the valley.

"There, there; do you see?" cried Crépin, crouching low and stretching forth his finger. "By my faith, he has done his work well, for there is André, and look at those others!"

The last the Lady Agathe understood not; but what she saw in the gathering twilight was the figure of the Sieur Giraud coming straight up the slope toward her. Despite his strange dress, there could be no mistake, and

she even caught his voice as he called some direction to the others. Behind him toiled a motley gathering, a half-score bound together, and evidently prisoners. Some of the others wore rough bandages, as though they had suffered wounds. Crépin drew her back forcibly as they drew near, and the two retreated together.

"Now do you believe, my lady?" he whispered.

And she did not answer.

A moment more and they reached Marcelle's cabin. She fled within the portal as the tramp of feet warned her that the Sieur Giraud and the others were coming straight that way, doubtless to report to Marcelle.

Outside the leafy entrance Crépin waited, and to the ears of the Lady Agathe came the voice of the Sieur Giraud with only the wood between.

"Ah, Crépin; you see, we have scraped together a fair bag, including André. Is Marcelle within?"

"No, she has gone on to the open camp some time ago," Crépin replied, and then added, in a lower tone, but still so that the Lady Agathe could hear every word: "I found a trusty messenger for your letter, Sieur Giraud. By now, I'll be sworn, it is in the hands of Count Charles."

"But will he give me the chance to come near him?" replied the Sieur Giraud.

"I believe it, he has spoken so often of you of late. Methinks you are the only one who could approach him in that way. Ay, I believe you'll have the chance you look for."

"Then, thank God the morrow will see the end of this!" had cried the Sieur Giraud, and, with that, had passed on toward the camp with his men.

As their footsteps died away, Crépin called her softly, and the Lady Agathe came to the portal.

"Now, do you believe, my lady, and will you give me the task of setting you free, or do you still cleave to your man of honour?"

And, after a moment, she had made answer:

"I will not go with you, no; a thousand times, no! Yet my senses teach me that for once you have foiled Nature by speaking the truth."

He uttered a curse and seemed about to add more, then suddenly slipped away into the growing darkness. The next moment she saw the reason of his flight, as Marcelle pushed aside the hanging leaves and entered. The Lady Agathe said no word, but threw herself upon the bed of pine in the corner, while Marcelle threw some wood on the fire and stood in its blaze.

"In truth, this was a very hell into which she had fallen," the Lady Agathe thought, for she made no doubt that this creature Marcelle was in this murderous plot against Count Charles with the rest. And the Sieur Giraud! It seemed that her heart must burst within her at the thought.

Of a sudden there was a quick step without, and the voice of Poncet came through to them:

"The Sieur Giraud would see the Lady Agathe at the earliest moment."

The Sieur Giraud himself never had come near the quarters of the women.

Marcelle trembled. At last it had come, this meeting she had dreaded.

The Lady Agathe raised her head weakly, but her voice rang steady and clear.

"The Lady Agathe has no wish to see the Sieur Giraud d'Orson," she said, and listened for a moment till she heard the man's steps retreating. Then she fell back upon the branches.

Marcelle was at her side with one bound.

"You have no wish to see the Sieur Giraud—*you!*" she cried, and seized the Lady Agathe's hand almost fiercely; but it was cold to her touch.

The Lady Agathe had swooned.

CHAPTER IX

THE STILL, SMALL VOICE

AND now, of a sudden, a great flood of compassion swelled high in the heart of Marcelle, sweeping before it all other feeling she had toward the Lady Agathe. The very sympathy which had been killed in its birth, by reason of her haughtiness, again sprang into life as Marcelle knelt beside her cold and senseless form.

With a sharp cry, she half carried, half dragged the Lady Agathe near to the fire, which now blazed strongly, sending its flying sparks and curling wisps of smoke upward toward the hole in the thatched roof. And now, with the swiftness and aptitude born of her many days of self-reliance, she deftly removed the clinging, sodden bodice, kirtle and under-dress, and, with a coarse cloth, briskly rubbed the soft white skin, turning the Lady Agathe so that the heat of the fire might aid her efforts.

At length she was rewarded by a sigh and a convulsive movement of the hand, that told of returning consciousness, and she saw that the Lady Agathe's eyes had opened and that she was regarding her weakly. But Marcelle gave voice to no maudlin expressions of thankfulness, as many women would have done. Instead, she took from its wooden peg a long, loose robe of wool—her own sleeping dress—and enveloped the Lady Agathe in its warm folds. Then she stepped to the door and, thrusting her head forth, gave a peculiar low cry. In

a moment's time the woman Bonne Fleuron, running in answer from the near-by cabin of the other women, stood before her, and to her she gave some hurried directions, so that she left as suddenly as she had come.

Meanwhile, the Lady Agathe had been slowly recovering her lost senses. She lay quite still in her snug wrapping, content—oh, so content!—to feel the returning glow that was spreading over her; but her eyes were upon Marcelle, and on her face was a look of much bewilderment. To her ears was borne upon the night air the hum of voices and an occasional shout or burst of laughter from the camp. Above the leafy rustle overhead, she heard the raucous cry of a night-hawk as he sought his prey, and the solemn lay of the tree-toads as they welcomed the onset of darkness; yet these sounds she scarce noticed. The night stillness of the great forest had cast its spell upon her, and one great and universal hush seemed to pervade all the world. For a moment she found herself wondering if it were possible that at court they were even now at supper, under the glare of a hundred candles, and merry with the clash of plate and the chatter of many voices.

As she lay musing upon this, Bonne Fleuron returned and handed Marcelle two basins of stewed meat, from which the steam rose slowly. Marcelle dismissed her with a word of thanks, and came quickly to the Lady Agathe.

"Eat, Agathe!" she said shortly, and proffered her one of the basins. "The hot flesh of the roebuck is good for such ailments as yours; eat!"

And the Lady Agathe took it from her with no more thought of resenting such use of her name, though, in truth, it still rankled within her.

"I thank you, Marcelle," she said simply, and fell to sipping the broth, while Marcelle seated herself opposite her and did likewise.

And, indeed, the steaming mixture did much to put new life into the Lady Agathe's veins, for the health was strong upon her, and with health goes hunger. She paused not till she had made an end of the contents of the basin and of the coarse bread which had served for cover.

As for Marcelle, she ate more slowly, with her gaze upon the fire and seemingly lost in thought, but at last she, too, set down the empty basin and, raising her head, regarded the other with a searching look.

"Why would you not see the Sieur Giraud, Agathe?" she asked of a sudden.

The Lady Agathe drew her robe closer about her and shuddered. Yet she hesitated a moment before replying and in that moment she came to the conclusion that to tell Marcelle of her discovery would, in truth, be madness. Did Marcelle suspect her of knowing aught of this plot against Count Charles, she trembled at the thought of what the woman might do. Yet there was one reason she might give in reply which would appear consistent with her former attitude.

"That the Sieur Giraud should have sunk to what he has become—a common outlaw—is sufficient answer to your question," she said quietly.

"And how know you what he has become?" asked Marcelle, "or, even admitting that it be true, what know you of the reasons of his fall, as you term it? Ha! A strange notion of loyalty you possess, Agathe, since whate'er the man has come to, it has been because of you."

A moment before Marcelle would have laughed at the

thought that she should upbraid the Lady Agathe in this fashion, and it was, in truth, a strange move in the game she played so to recall this other to her duty. Yet she found herself taking a very great measure of pleasure in thus taunting her.

"I spoke not idly; nor would I accuse any man without proof of my words," said the Lady Agathe. "That the Sieur Giraud numbers himself among your company, I make no doubt, since within the hour I saw him returning from some expedition at the head of a band of Companions. God knows, I need not your reproaches to remind me that it was through me he came to his ruin with Count Charles, yet I see not how you should be so informed, unless——"

"Unless the Sieur Giraud himself so made it known," interrupted Marcelle. "Your memory is but short-lived; you forget the letter which, destined for you, fell under my eyes first, Agathe. The Sieur Giraud, in the despair of his disgrace, did tell me that a woman was concerned therein. The inference was clear, was it not?"

"You read that letter, Marcelle? Then you—you know?"

"Yes, I know, Agathe," answered Marcelle simply, and for some moments the two sat silent. Then Marcelle spoke again very quietly.

"You loved the Sieur Giraud, Agathe?"

On the Lady Agathe's face was another shadow besides those thrown by the flaring fire-light, and her answer was slow in coming.

"I do not know. Why I should so speak of this with you, Marcelle, I know not, save that he is here and one of you. One thing I may swear, that ne'er did I esteem man more highly than I did the Sieur Giraud d'Orson, nor more greatly prize any man's attachment, and now

that he has come to this, I feel that the very heart has been torn from me. Yet I may not be sure that this was love."

Marcelle looked at her with wide-opened eyes in which blazed a fierce light of resentment.

"And so, uncertain of your very self, uncertain whether the blind devotion of the Sieur Giraud ever should have its reward from you, you still could demand a service of him which might mean, and has resulted, in his ruin? Oh, you need not look surprise at me! I know the tale well enough—ay, the Sieur Giraud has told me, if it comes to that. Why should he not? All was at an end and there is relief in the mere telling of such torment as he suffered. Bah! You have done a thing that makes me hate you, Agathe, for even I, Marcelle the Mad, Marcelle, the scorned outcast, would accept no such homage from a man if I might not freely give myself up to him body and soul."

The Lady Agathe looked at her curiously, but Marcelle seemed to have forgotten her as she spoke the last word, and her eyes glowed even as the charring wood before her.

"Ay, I would pay—O God, how I would pay!" the Lady Agathe heard her mutter passionately and saw her small hands clench sharply.

The Lady Agathe was unused to such outbursts; she found herself understanding less and less of this strange creature, who one moment ministered to her comforts with all gentleness, the next became a perfect virago. It was not madness from which this girl suffered; of that she was now convinced, and she could but attribute such capriciousness to the wild and turbulent existence she led. Of what use, then, would be any attempt at argument with her, even did she not deem it beneath her to

take any notice of the lesson Marcelle had so presumptuously read her?

As this passed through the Lady Agathe's mind, Marcelle rose and set about arranging the pine branches in two heaps, one on either side of the fire. On these she spread some rough blankets which she selected from a pile in the corner, and then threw another armful of wood upon the fire. All this she did mechanically and with never a thought of the service she was so rendering the other, for her mind was teeming with many new fancies. When she had made an end of her task, she turned to the Lady Agathe and, pointing to one of the rude beds, said shortly:

"You will be tired after the day's travel; it is best that you take some rest now."

With the obedience of a child, the Lady Agathe moved to the bed and crept beneath the blankets, and a moment later saw Marcelle roll herself in her own and settle into quiet. Then the Lady Agathe spoke of a sudden.

"You would sleep in your dress, Marcelle? I have taken——"

The voice of Marcelle came almost petulantly from beneath the coverings.

"It is nothing; nor is it the first time I have done so. You may not wear your own dress; therefore have done with talk and seek such sleep as you may."

No more said the Lady Agathe; but turned her face from the fire and closed her eyes. In truth, she was worn with fatigue, yet it was that fatigue which pervades all the body with an aching dulness and renders sleep, which would be so welcome, impossible. Any position she adopted seemed attended with the same discomfort, for the bed, while soft and yielding to her body,

kept her awake by its very strangeness. Nor is it probable that even had she suffered no physical torment she would have found repose coming easily to her that night, in the flood of uncertainty and fear that possessed her mind. She had indeed escaped the fate that had seemed so near; no longer need she dread that marriage with Monsieur Vignolles, yet she found herself asking if she had not, indeed, fallen from bad to worse plight. That she should even ask the question of herself; that any predicament should not be preferable to what she had escaped was a matter for wonderment to her; but she confessed that it was so. Was it because Monsieur Vignolles had chosen to face the dangers in coming to this place, rather than desert her? Was it because of a vague liking for this man they would have forced upon her, a liking which had arisen under the most adverse conditions and against her own will? Or was it that the terror she felt in the presence of this wretched company outweighed all other considerations with her? She knew not.

And then the Sieur Giraud, the one on whom she would have sworn she might depend, even to his very life—to find him sunk to his present level, a Companion of the Green Tent, and with foul murder in his heart!

What was to be the outcome of it all? To what end did this Marcelle the Mad refuse to set a price on her deliverance?

So the minutes lengthened into hours and still she tossed restlessly from side to side, ever thinking, thinking with eyes that would fly open to strain into the gloom overhead, as though they would find the solution there.

The fire died to a mass of dull-glowing ashes and with it seemed to expire the last remnant of the fortitude she so had striven to maintain. She turned face

downward and the tears came in one great despairing rush that shook her very frame with an agonised relief.

"Don't—don't do that!"

The Lady Agathe turned suddenly to see that Marcelle was sitting upright and pointing a peremptory finger at her.

"Don't do that!" she repeated, reaching over and throwing more wood upon the fire. "Why should you weep? There's no excuse for it. I won't have it, do you hear? I won't have it!"

She spoke disjointedly and in a pettish tone, and with the returning flicker of the flames the Lady Agathe saw that her eyes, too, were wide open and bore no traces of sudden awakening.

"You—you have not been asleep, Marcelle?" she said.

"Asleep?"

Marcelle gave a harsh little laugh.

"I asleep, with the torture my mind gives me? No; since you have asked it, not for a moment have my eyes closed; not a motion of yours, as you tossed about, escaped me, for I, too, have thoughts perchance as torturing as your own, Agathe. But I do not give way to weeping, nor shall you. I cannot bear it."

"I meant not to disturb you, Marcelle; and, indeed, I believed that I wept not aloud. But as soon bid the wind cease its sighing through the trees without, as think to bridle the heart-ache within me at your will. If in my misery I have disturbed you, remember I am not here by my own desire, but by yours. As to the thoughts which have kept sleep from you, I know naught, but compare not your suffering to mine nor your condition to my own lonely plight."

"And do you think that you alone may feel this loneli-

ness?" asked Marcelle quickly. "You are—and so you shall be while it pleases me—one of us, a Companion of the Green Tent; but when that is ended you shall be free to go unmolested, for so I have decided. You feel the loneliness of your position, but what think you I feel, I, who must live on day by day knowing that no such relief awaits me?"

"I do not understand you, Marcelle; you are not forced to live in these hills as you do."

"No; you do not understand me, or you would not say that. What manner of heart think you I have if you mean that I might desert these people with whom I have cast my lot?"

"The very name your company has adopted betokens a fellowship," said the Lady Agathe. "Moreover, as I know, there are other women here."

"Yes; there are other women here; but in God's name, what think you I have in common with them, save the hatred we all bear your people and most of all the Count de Charolais? And so it is with all of them. I help them with such projects as they may have in mind; I try to hearten them when they would give over to discouragement, and I see that fair play is had among them. In return, they yield me a kind of blind obedience and devotion; there it ends. For among them I am as destitute of companionship as though living alone in these Ardennes woods."

The Lady Agathe was nonplussed. Such talk as this she had not looked for, but the ring of truth was in every word Marcelle had said. Despite herself and despite their relative positions, the Lady Agathe felt that a tenderness was arising within her for this strange girl.

"And it was this—this sense of being alone that kept sleep from you, Marcelle?" she asked.

"Yes; that and I know not how many other crowding thoughts besides," replied Marcelle, her great eyes fixed on the other's face, and then, seeming to take a sudden resolve, "Listen, you who cannot understand my loneliness. While you moved restlessly yonder, I heard, as I have said, for I, too, was fighting with myself and all because of you. 'What had induced me to have you brought here; why had I quartered you here in my own cabin; why were you on the morrow to become a Companion?' Such were the questions I tried to solve in such calm as I could force myself to assume, and in the end the answer came clear and unmistakable."

The Lady Agathe raised herself upon her elbow.

"And what was it, Marcelle? Why had you done these things?"

Marcelle buried her face in her hands.

"Because—because I was dying of solitude, dying of this going on for ever with never one near me to whom I might talk freely. Ah, do not smile, Agathe."

"I am not smiling; go on, Marcelle," was the quiet answer.

"And because I felt that if it went on any longer, I should, in truth, go mad as they call me. I—I thought 'twas for another reason—but that matters not. I know now 'twas the great cry within me for companionship; the yearning groping of my hand in the darkness of isolation for the sustaining grasp of another. Night after night have I lain here conscious of this great void in my life and enduring tortures till sheer weariness brought relief. To-night there came over me a great peace, when I had come to know, to understand. Even your uneasy tossing about fell with pleasant sound upon my ears, for, thank God, I was no longer alone! And then you wept, and I could not bear that. O Agathe, can you not see

how it is? Now that I have had you, I cannot let you go. Forget what I have said that may have been harsh in tone. You shall stay here with me; you shall be one of us; but you shall also be as myself, and your desires I will place above my own, I swear it! Only speak with me, speak with me, and sometimes look upon me kindly if you may, for I am starving."

Her slight figure shook with the intensity of her emotion. As for the Lady Agathe, a strange look had come into her face, and her eyes shone soft in the fire-light, soft as the tender dawn of compassion may render such eyes as hers. She thought not of her position now; nor of those troubles of her own which had so grievously assailed her a short time before; but only of this trembling little figure sitting bolt-upright before her, with a very fever of longing in her dry eyes and mute pleading in the half-opened lips.

The Lady Agathe threw back the corner of her covering.

"Come, Marcelle!" she said.

The next instant, with a cry of transport, Marcelle had flown to her and was sobbing forth her very soul in her arms.

And then for a long time they lay quiet and the mind of the Lady Agathe was occupied indeed. Had Fate had a hand in bringing her hither that she might prevent this dastardly murder of Count Charles? Marcelle had said that if she (the Lady Agathe) were kind she might ask anything of her, and as she felt the tumultuous flutter of that little heart next her own, the Lady Agathe believed that she had meant it. If God had appointed her his agent in thwarting this foul deed, then would the Lady Agathe face any suffering herself without a murmur. Not that her heart was filled with any great love for

Count Charles; but because she was a good and true woman and turned from the shedding of blood with horror. With her, to think was to act.

Very gently she took Marcelle by the shoulders and held her from her so that she might look into her eyes.

"Marcelle, you promise me much in return for little," she said. "For kind words, which I am not minded to deny you, you offer to place my own desires above your own. So be it! I will fulfil my part of the bargain; from you I demand the abandonment of this plot against the life of the Count de Charolais."

The form of Marcelle straightened suddenly in her arms.

"The plot against—what can you know of that?" she gasped in a frightened tone.

"Enough to make me loathe the very speech of it with you, Marcelle. Ah, how can you, with such a heart as you have shown me, how can you plan such sinful deed as this?"

"I—I have not planned it!" cried Marcelle. "But how have you learned of this?"

And at that, the Lady Agathe told her of all that she had discovered from Crépin, while Marcelle lay in her arms and only by an occasional gasp or exclamation indicated that she heard. As the Lady Agathe ended, she drew slightly back from her.

"So Crépin would have sold me, would he?" she cried angrily. "For gold he would have taken you from me. By my faith, he shall pay——"

"But, Marcelle, that is not what should concern you," said the Lady Agathe. "This attempt upon Count Charles must be stopped. You must stop it."

"I stop it—I?" said Marcelle in a dazed voice.

"You know not what you ask; nor, if it comes to that, would I interfere if I could."

The Lady Agathe looked the horror she felt into Marcelle's eyes.

"You would not interfere—you would stoop to murder in your hatred of any man? I cannot believe it, Marcelle."

"Murder! 'Tis a term that lends itself to easy meaning. When Count Charles rides down a half-score such wretches as we are, and hangs them to the very trees beneath which they have lived, 'tis just punishment upon the rebellious outlaws; but if the chance falls the other way—ah, then 'tis murder! The Companions of the Green Tent are, to them, as fair game as the wild boar of the forest. Be it so! If the boar turns when hard pressed, they need not be surprised."

"But this blow you speak for is no fair one, delivered in self-defence," cried the Lady Agathe. "You would lure a man to his death with fair but lying promises."

"With the method I have had naught to do, as I have told you," answered Marcelle. "But forget not one thing, Agathe. Against us, ere long, will come that trained army from Namur. We must fight back with such weapons as we have."

"Weapons! Say rather fraud and assassination. O God! How is it that one like the Sieur Giraud could ever be the implement for such crime? What hellish spell have you cast over him?"

"The Sieur Giraud——"

Marcelle checked herself suddenly. She had been on the point of assuring the Lady Agathe that he was but a cat's-paw in the game Crépin played; but it flashed through her mind that to do so would bring them to-

gether at the first opportunity. The Lady Agathe would inform him of the use that had been made of him and never would he rest till he had killed Crépin. This might not be, for Crépin must live to perform his task.

The Lady Agathe noted not Marcelle's sudden hesitation.

"Ay; the Sieur Giraud, one whom a fortnight ago methought the most upright man I had ever known—now become the lowest thing on earth, a common cutthroat. But, Marcelle, let us not waste a moment in idle talk. Oh, I beg of you let not Crépin go upon this errand! You are leader here; what you say they will obey. Have him seized; have the Sieur Giraud seized, and both held till the morrow be over."

"Agathe, you do not understand," said Marcelle. "I would that you had asked me something I might perform; but this may not be. I believe that few are in the plot now; I believe that Crépin will keep it so, if possible, that he may have the greater reward and glory; but if I should try to oppose him, he would turn upon me. He would inform the rest of what I tried to prevent, I, Marcelle, their leader, and the greatest hater of this Count Charles among them all. And what think you would be the end? They would tear me limb from limb, free Crépin and any other I might have seized, and the plot would go on as before. No; it may not be! Nor, as I have said, would I raise one finger to save Count Charles's life. I have suffered too much at his hands and the world will be the better for his riddance."

A moment the Lady Agathe held silent. Then she pushed Marcelle from her and said coldly:

"I have but one other request. Will you tell me the spot where this crime is to take place?"

"Why would you know?"

The Lady Agathe fixed Marcelle with a look before which she quailed.

"Because I am a woman in whom remains some conscience; because I know that if I sat idle while this murder was being done, there is a God above who would judge me as pitilessly as he would the very murderer himself. Think you I could for the rest of my life bear up under such burden? Think you that by day I could have any other thoughts save that I had slain a fellow-creature, one of God's own creation? Think you that by night I ever might have repose with this one's last cry of agony ringing in my ears and the very feel of his blood upon my hands as I started from my sleep?"

"O God, speak not so, Agathe!" shuddered Marcelle.

"Call not upon the God you so would set at defiance," said the Lady Agathe, "for it is but a mockery. You ask why I would know the place selected for this deed. I tell you it is because rather than meet my Maker with this on my soul, I, knowing little of this forest as I do, would strive to make my way thither to give warning in time."

"It might mean your death," said Marcelle in trembling voice.

"And if it did—if the very blow meant for the other should stretch me low, yet would I be repaid, for to be resigned to death is all that may render it painless. Marcelle, if this murder occurs, you will have gratified a great earthly revenge, but your remaining life will be a hell, and at last, you will come before God with a terrible reckoning to pay. O Marcelle, I beseech you, think, think! Are the tortures of the damned naught to you?"

With a passionate outburst of tears, Marcelle flung

herself into the Lady Agathe's arms and they closed about her soothingly.

"I—I will prevent this; I swear it, Agathe! O God, give me strength for it!" Marcelle cried brokenly.

"Even if it does mean your life, Marcelle?" said the Lady Agathe gently.

"It will mean my life," sobbed Marcelle, "but I—I have seen a great light, a light that seems afar off, yet I feel it to be very near, and I, too, shall find death painless, Agathe. The Count de Charolais shall live. A voice within me bids that it shall be so."

The Lady Agathe drew the trembling form close to her and bending her head till the gold of her hair fell in a shining aureola about the dark locks of Marcelle, kissed her softly. She smiled, too, for she had won.

And so, after a time, sleep found them.

CHAPTER X

ON TO THE VINE-GROWER'S

WHEN the man Poncet Meux had returned bearing the curt refusal of the Lady Agathe to see him, the Sieur Giraud had been staggered. It had not taken him many moments to learn of her presence and that of Monsieur Vignolles in the camp, and his first feeling had been one of intense wrath that Marcelle should have taken such advantage of what he had told her. This had, however, quickly yielded to one of relief that the Lady Agathe had escaped the fate that awaited her at Bruges. He had scarcely paused to consider what reason had impelled Marcelle so to waylay her. That the Lady Agathe was there in their very midst had outweighed all else in his mind and he had hastened with all speed to put himself in communication with her, anxious to do her such service as she might require. That he should have burned with impatience to be near the Lady Agathe, to feel again the touch of her hand in his own and to look into her eyes, was no more nor less than might have been expected.

And now as he waited, Poncet brought him this abrupt message.

"She—she will not see me?" he stammered. "There is some mistake."

"'Tis not on my side, then," answered Poncet, shrugging his shoulders. "By St. Hubert, there was small doubt in her mind by the way the words came from her!

But pshaw, man, despair not! Ne'er was there woman who practised not the shuffle of blowing hot and cold by turns—I, who know them, tell you this—and 'tis like enough that in the morning you'll be taking to cover to keep her from laying hands on you. Faith, 'twas but two nights ago that Bonne Fleuron——"

But the Sieur Giraud tarried not to hear, and turning on his heel, strode rapidly away. Poncet remained a moment looking after him; then shook his head.

"There's no understanding this Sieur Giraud," he muttered. "Any man should be content with what he's done this day, yet the whim of a woman serves to throw him into a fit."

He turned and moved off toward the camp, his steps keeping time to the rollicking song that he hummed:

> The Devil he ruled with never a care;
> And happy was he and well;
> Till the day in his life,
> When he took him a wife;
> Then the Devil moved out of Hell.

Meanwhile, the Sieur Giraud made his way rapidly to Tite's particular retreat in the near-by hillside. Since he was denied seeing the Lady Agathe, he would learn what he might from Monsieur Vignolles.

The latter was seated before the entrance to the cave, devouring with much gusto the food which had just been handed him. On his right, at some little distance, sat Tite and another of the Companions, and while they were similarly engaged they ever kept a wary eye upon their charge, and their bows lay ready to hand. In truth, Tite had little fear that the man would make any attempt at escape, since he had come there of his own will, yet he took no chances.

So intent was Monsieur Vignolles upon the savoury work before him that the Sieur Giraud came to a halt almost at his side without his noting his presence.

"Monsieur Vignolles!"

The metal basin clattered sharply on the stones and went rolling noisily down the hill, while Monsieur Vignolles sprang to his feet.

"The devil! The very voice of the Sieur Giraud d'Orson!" he cried sharply, and then peering closely into the other's face, added:

"Ay, by my faith, 'tis you indeed, Sieur Giraud, yet in the darkness I'd have passed you by—but not without an eye behind lest I receive a foot of shaft in the back. My compliments to you. Your new dress lends a fierceness to your aspect that would secure you all of any road that honest men travel. And in your cap—yes; I'll be sworn, the badge of a Companion! So this is what you have come to?"

"This is what I have come to," answered the Sieur Giraud quietly; "but I come not here to speak of myself, monsieur; I would know how it chances that the Lady Agathe and you should find yourselves in these hills."

"Then you know not? By the garb you wear you should have little to learn of me, since 'twas the doing of this very band."

"Yet had I no hand in it, if you would mean that, monsieur," replied the Sieur Giraud. "Nor will it be best for you to put such thought into words again. I ask you once more how this has happened."

The other seemed to shake off his doubt.

"What you say rings true enough," he said, "nor is there aught to conceal, yet you might have the tale straighter from that old fox yonder, who calls himself

Tite. Two leagues along the Bruges road—storm halts us—horses stampeded by shot from roadside and with them the witlings who had them in charge—short fight, all one-sided—the devil's own jaunt through the forest—and here we are. Simple enough, is it not?"

"Yet how—why chanced it that you were with the Lady Agathe?" asked the Sieur Giraud as Tite approached them.

"I beg you believe 'twas not by my own choice. 'Twas my Lord the Constable's suggestion, and Monseigneur and Count Charles fell in with it quick enough. By my faith! I would it had been some other, who might have made better play against these rogues, and yet——"

"And yet?"

"And yet, perchance, 'tis as well, since now I need have no woman thrust upon me."

Tite grunted.

"Ha! I know not what you may mean; but methinks 'twas you foisted yourself upon the lady, when you had clear field to make off," he said, and entered the cave, to return a moment later with an armful of wood wherewith he proceeded to build a blaze, over which he heated some drink in a basin.

"Is this true, monsieur? You came of your own will?" asked the Sieur Giraud.

"Faith, what will has a man who has been manhandled by such knaves as these and lain under the weight of six of them, while the sword was wrung from his grasp?" replied Monsieur Vignolles. "Moreover, what would you have had; that I should have scrubbed myself clean, and gone back to Namur with empty sheath and four lusty rogues at my back, and ne'er a scratch upon any of us? In truth, I love the telling of a

tale as well as the next man; but I like one with more point to it."

"Yet, you may not have bettered yourself in coming," growled Tite, as he started away.

"Which observation shows great thought and little discernment, old Whitehead," answered Monsieur Vignolles, "for up to the present I live; and were I at Namur, methinks they would even now be saying a mass for my soul. But come, Sieur Giraud, now that you have milked me dry, a word of yourself, and how it is that you wear the dress of these thieves."

And with that, the Sieur Giraud briefly ran over the events which had transpired since last they had parted at the town gates. As he ended, Monsieur Vignolles slapped his thigh and spoke quickly.

"And you have taken an oath to abide by the wishes of this rabble of outlaws—the will of Marcelle the Mad?"

He paused a moment, and then added:

"May the devil seize me if I blame you though, since 'twas so close a thing with you! But what has acted upon the Lady Agathe that she should turn against you? Think you 'tis only that she has learned what you have become?"

"I know not; perchance 'tis so, for she has a sense of honour above most women. But listen, Monsieur Vignolles, whate'er the oath I have taken; whate'er the issue to me; the Lady Agathe shall not be left to the mercies of these Companions, or the whims of Marcelle. You, I take it, came here with the idea of being of some aid to her if possible. So be it; we will work together for her release."

"Little enough will be my part with two of your comrades ever waiting to draw bow upon me," said Mon-

sieur Vignolles, with a glance at Tite and the other. "Besides, even assuming that we should get away with my lady, where are we to go? You would answer to Dauphiné; but, in truth, men, you can scarce hope to begin such journey without money, without horses, and without any means of obtaining the smallest comforts my lady would require."

The Sieur Giraud kicked at the gravel beneath his feet. There was truth in what the other had said; so much truth that his resentment was almost personal.

"We shall find a way, monsieur," he said stubbornly. "I tell you the Lady Agathe must not remain here a day longer than need be, for I place no trust now in Marcelle. Why has she seized my lady?"

"What for, save for ransom? That is clear enough," answered Monsieur Vignolles shortly.

"It may be so; yet, in truth, I doubt it. Ne'er have I yet seen her take any share of the gold these thieves lay hands on, and her own desires lie not that way. Monsieur Vignolles, the more I see of Marcelle the less do I know her. At times she is as gentle as my lady herself; at others she flies into such passion that I know her not for the same. Is she capable of doing my lady a harm? In truth, I know not. One moment I believe it; the next, scoff at the idea. But I fear, monsieur, I fear, and would have my lady beyond her reach. Give me till morning; I shall find some plan."

"So be it," replied the other. "As for myself, I am more in the dark than you are. Only this day my lady spoke of you with much kindness and sorrow, methought. Now she refuses you a word, refuses even to see you. Is it magic or what devilish power does this Marcelle possess that affects all in these hills who fall into her clutches? But no; one so beautiful as this girl can have

naught to do with sorcery, for save for my lady herself, ne'er have I seen woman who could compare with her."

The Sieur Giraud paused a moment before replying, and the other felt that his eyes were searching him intently. Then he said:

"At all events, there is naught to be done to-night, monsieur. Await my return in the morning, and meanwhile give Tite no cause to suspect what is in your mind."

With that he bowed and left Monsieur Vignolles as abruptly as he had come.

To seek his own burrow in the hillside and to throw himself down upon his blanket was the work of but few moments. To conjure up some feasible plan for my lady's escape was a matter of hours, but at last he seemed satisfied and slept, yet the first gray light in the east found him astir.

He had come to depend on himself alone, had the Sieur Giraud, erstwhile captain of lance with camp-followers and lackeys at his beck and call. There was therefore naught surprising in the way he took his cut from the loin of a hanging deer carcass, nor in the readiness with which he cooked it over the fire. He had ended his repast when the sun shot its first rays slantingly through the trees and the others were just straggling with sleepy yawns into the light of the new day. Their salutations he scarce noted as he set forth toward the quarters of Monsieur Vignolles.

As he picked his way among the trees, he came, of a sudden, face to face with Marcelle. She, too, it seemed, was abroad early this day. An instant they stood confronting each other, then, as though to prevent her escaping him, he sprang forward with a hoarse cry and seized her by the arm.

"So, Marcelle, you would lead me on to tell you of the Lady Agathe but that you might turn it to some wretched scheme of your own!" he said.

"You are hurting me," she answered, her gaze falling before his. "Oh, you need have no fear; I shall not run from you, Sieur Giraud."

Indeed, in his anger he had seized her roughly enough, and at her tone he released her quickly.

"I meant not to hurt you, Marcelle," he said, "though I know not why I should have such feeling for you. The Lady Agathe—she is well?"

"She sleeps still. Ay, she is well."

"And for what purpose have you brought her here?"

A far-away look was in her eyes, and for a moment she smiled, and this still further angered him, for he understood not what was in her mind.

"I ask you again, for what purpose you have played this base trick?" he cried hotly.

Marcelle roused herself. She must play her part before him, yet she was in no mood for the playing of parts that morning.

"For what purpose, think you, one of Lady Agathe's station should be held by such paupers as we are?" she answered slowly, for it was hard to lie thus to the man she loved.

"My God! I had not believed it of you, Marcelle," he cried. "No; in truth, I had thought to see some good back of all the wild savagery within you; even to read in your eyes at times——"

She stretched her hands toward him suddenly.

"What? What did you think to read there?" she cried, and he marvelled at the light in her eyes, the same light that he had seen there the day she had left him so suddenly, swearing she hated him. Had he been less pos-

sessed with the thought of the Lady Agathe, in truth, he now might have read with understanding. As it was, he merely said:

"Why speak of what I now know to have been but fantasy? You have abused the very confidence I gave you to bring suffering upon the Lady Agathe."

Marcelle's head again fell upon her breast, and again she took up her rôle.

"You speak strangely, Sieur Giraud, since by her very seizure she was saved from a marriage she detested. That at least was something."

"That was much, Marcelle," he answered, "but the manner of its doing was cruel, and now you hold her for a payment that shall reward the service. Speak not of it then as a favour conferred upon her, for 'tis naught but a forced bargain. Name your price and give her freedom, such as she will pay for gladly."

"Ay; in truth, it has been a forced bargain between us," he heard her murmur, and again that strange smile was upon her face.

"Moreover, I would know what has influenced the Lady Agathe against me," he went on. "Till she came here—till she had seen and spoken with you—she held no such prejudice. What lie have you whispered in her ear that so should turn her?"

His every word stabbed her with sharp pain, yet she must go on. O God, could this man only know! But she might not answer him truly, even had she deemed it best, for ahead of her this day waited a task that must not fail, a task that she alone might do.

"You speak harsh words, Sieur Giraud; harsher than you know," she said slowly. "No lie of mine has poisoned the mind of the Lady Agathe against you, that I swear. As for the price of her deliverance, it is what-

ever she herself may choose to pay. I have naught to say thereon, and she may go from here with no hindrance from me, and at any time she so wills."

His face lighted suddenly.

"Is it possible I can have been so mistaken—that you have done this for—for me, Marcelle?" he cried, and leaned forward to look into her eyes. "If so, then on my knees will I humbly beg forgiveness for the hard words I have uttered. What my lady holds against me I know not, yet if you have done this thing for my sake, naught have you had to do with it."

It flashed upon Marcelle with dazing suddenness, and it seemed to her that he must be trying to tear the very heart from within her. How could he believe that she, loving him as she did, could bring this other to his side to mock her own agony? Ah, but then he knew not how she loved him. Out of the kindness of her heart he thought she had done it. She laughed—a tense, discordant laugh it was—and it jarred upon his ears.

"For your sake; for your sake?" she cried, and then buried her face in her hands and leaned against the tree at her side. "Oh, my God; no—no—no! Give me credit only for what I have done—what I shall do."

A long time he stood and watched her, uncertain how to proceed, for, in truth, he understood naught of what she said, and believed that a mad fit was indeed upon her.

"I do not understand you, Marcelle," he said finally. "But the time has come when our ways must separate. The Lady Agathe's coming has but hastened the hour which I had set in my mind. You have said that she should go from here without hindrance whenever she wills. So be it; she shall go this very day."

"Where?"

"Back to Dauphiné with Monsieur Vignolles, if such

be possible, and methinks, if my plans bear fruit, I may aid them. My lady will have naught to do with me now, it seems. Perchance, when I am restored to favour, she may again be pleased to accept my aid, and money she will need if she hopes to reach Dauphiné."

He spoke bitterly.

A moment she was silent and stood looking at him with a great wonder in her eyes.

"You have spoken before of this renewal of your favour, Sieur Giraud. You mean that if Count Charles should reinstate you, you again would risk your life to serve the Lady Agathe—to assist in her escape?"

He shook his head.

"There would be no question this time of risking life, Marcelle; 'twould be the mere trouble of getting the gold into Monsieur Vignolles's hands."

Again she was silent, and this time for a long while. When she spoke it was in a low tone and with much earnestness.

"Sieur Giraud, it shall be as you say, so far as concerns me. You are released from your oath; Monsieur Vignolles shall be set free, and the Lady Agathe may go when she wills. It is strange that this day should see the parting of so many of us, for I, too, am going on a journey, Sieur Giraud, a longer one than any of you, methinks."

"You, Marcelle!"

"Ay; to-day will see the last of Marcelle the Mad in these Ardennes woods. And, Sieur Giraud, whether you gain the restoration you hope for or whether you again return to wear the green badge of a Companion—of Marcelle—you'll think sometimes of me. I beg of you forget that worst side I have shown, and hold in memory only my better self, the part that always has been crying

within me for outlet, yet so seldom has obtained it. Adieu, Sieur Giraud!"

"But, Marcelle, where go you? Surely you will not desert the Companions!"

He had forgotten the Lady Agathe and felt only a great desire to know what the trembling little figure before him meditated. Her answer came slowly, almost dreamily.

"Where do I go? Far, far away, and soon the name of Marcelle the Mad will become but a threat to hold over children—your children, mayhap, Sieur Giraud."

"No, no; say you not so, Marcelle!" he cried hoarsely, for there was a sadness in her voice that sank deep into his heart.

"Say you not so, Marcelle," he repeated. "I know not what you meditate, but surely you cannot believe—oh, Marcelle, I hate the very words you spoke."

She raised her eyes, and as he stood before her he seemed to swim—the very forest seemed to swim—in space. With a cry, startled, despairing, and rending her very soul, she seized his hand and bore it to her lips. The next moment she was gone and he knew not if the "Adieu, Sieur Giraud," really had been uttered or was but the soft breath of the wind through the trees above.

Then he drew himself up, and bethinking himself of his errand, strode slowly away. And as he walked, his hand went often to his lips.

He came upon Monsieur Vignolles at the base of the hillside which had harboured him over night, busily engaged in sousing his head in the cool water that purled along the centre of the stream bed. Higher up on the bank Tite tugged and swore at the tangled lacings of his buckskin shoes.

At the sound of the approaching footstep Monsieur Vignolles raised his head quickly, and blew the water from his face.

"So you are astir as well, Sieur Giraud?" he sputtered. "By my faith, small need have you here for any reveille with such as old Whitehead yonder to forestall the very sun and see that you bestir yourselves! For the past hour I have known no rest with his proddings in the back, nor he any contentment till he had routed me out. But speak, man. Your face shows that you bear some news. Has the idea you sought come to you with the morning?"

"Ay, and some others as well," replied the Sieur Giraud. "But what think you is the latest move of Marcelle?"

Monsieur Vignolles laughed.

"Ask me why the wind should veer from north to south; ask me why this water will not run uphill, yet will travel to the farthermost leaves of the trees overhead, and I'll find some answer. But call on no man to forecast the freaks of a woman's mind, the more so if such woman be Marcelle the Mad. Go on; I listen."

"Then know that she has relieved us of the half of our task," said the Sieur Giraud. "You are free—or will be soon—and so is the Lady Agathe—free to go wherever you will."

"The devil! And what has brought about this change of heart?"

"I know not; but it suffices that it should be so," replied the Sieur Giraud, shaking his head thoughtfully. "I come here direct from seeing Marcelle, having encountered her on the way. She seemed not herself, and spoke strangely of going away upon some journey, all of which I understood not, yet——"

He paused, and seemed lost to the other's presence for a moment.

"Yet what?" asked Monsieur Vignolles, and the Sieur Giraud roused with an effort.

"It is no matter, monsieur," he said quietly. "What concerns us is that my lady need remain here no longer. You were wrong in believing her held for gold; but whatever the reason of her seizure, it is no longer potent. You must go at once, you and the Lady Agathe."

Monsieur Vignolles came closer and looked earnestly into the Sieur Giraud's face.

"I—I must go; I and the Lady Agathe? And what of you?" he asked sharply.

"My work lies another way, monsieur. Soon—perchance even to-day—I may be restored to the favour I have lost. I may not tell you more, since I am sworn to secrecy; but I believe the hope to be no vain one. The Lady Agathe will have naught to do with me for some reason, and——"

"But surely you will learn this reason—you will see her!" broke in Monsieur Vignolles.

The Sieur Giraud shook his head.

"No; that I will not," he answered coldly. "Some service have I tried to be to my lady, and because of what came of it—what I have become—she would lend willing ear against me. Am I, then, to force myself upon her; am I to plead for myself with one so easily swayed from regard to mistrust? No, monsieur; though I have little left of pride, that little I will retain so long as may be. Some day the matter will be cleared perchance. But enough of that. Whatever my lady may believe, it must not affect her going from this place. You, Monsieur Vignolles, shall gratify the wish you had in coming here; you shall escort her to safety."

"Before have I told you that such is impossible without money, and——"

"And that you shall have, if my plans fail me not," cut in the Sieur Giraud. "Last night did I conjure out how the affair might be managed, and this morning the strange manner of Marcelle has thrown me into a fever to see my lady safe away from here. Yet she may not wander aimlessly about in these Ardennes till such time as I may aid her with the means to travel as becomes her station. There is, however, one refuge where methinks she may safely await its coming; I mean the house of the old vine-grower, Poncet's father. Moreover, she will have the company of the old man's wife, no small thing in her eyes, I'll be sworn. What say you? The house, you know well enough, is but a few leagues from here, a distance you may easily make on foot."

"Faith, 'tis well enough conceived," answered Monsieur Vignolles; "but I much doubt if these worthy people may be trusted."

"What, then, is there to intrust to them, monsieur? What they might not do for the gold we shall promise them, they will do through fear. Remember, 'tis not the first time we have called upon them."

For some moments Monsieur Vignolles was silent; then he said musingly:

"In truth, Sieur Giraud, you would do much for my lady, more than most men who had been so treated."

The Sieur Giraud answered almost with anger.

"Let my first failure suffice to explain that. If you are agreed, I am off to the vine-grower's to make the arrangement for your coming. By noon I should be there, and I'll answer for their complaisance. Will you follow with the Lady Agathe? At least, she will trust you."

"You are sure that I shall be free to do so?" asked Monsieur Vignolles, with a jerk of his head toward Tite, and the Sieur Giraud answered quickly enough, for he believed in Marcelle's sincerity, and her tone was still in his ears.

"Yes; you will be relieved of your guard, have no fear."

"Then will I bring my lady to the vine-grower's," replied Monsieur Vignolles, "and, after, we may make further arrangements. But the saints forbid that you should fail in this reinstatement you look for!"

"Even so, my lady would be in no worse plight than now," was the answer. "Therefore, do you lose no time in seeing her. I will await you at the man Meux's. Ha! If I mistake me not, here is the order for your release now."

The Sieur Giraud pointed to one of the Companions who at the moment scrambled down the bank and spoke with Tite. In a moment the latter left him and came to Monsieur Vignolles.

"Now that you're here and forced to remain, I make no doubt that you itch to be away," he said grimly. "Therefore, do you go when it pleases you, since Marcelle bids me have no more to do with you, and a good riddance it is, indeed."

"So she opens the way for me, does she?" said Monsieur Vignolles. "Thanks—a thousand thanks be hers for the favour, for, in truth, old Whitehead, your company had begun to pall upon me. Methinks, since rousing me this morning, you have spoken once, and then to bid me shut my mouth. Have no fear; I go even upon the instant, loath though I am to leave such affection behind."

Tite's answer was indistinct. The truth was, he had

scarcely known how to take Monsieur Vignolles, and was glad, as he said, to be rid of his charge. As he stalked away, the Sieur Giraud said shortly:

"Then 'tis understood, monsieur. I will be off to render your reception easy. As for yourself, do you lose no time in following with my lady. But have a care not to rouse the suspicions of the band that you are aiding her escape. Marcelle will offer no hindrance, but the others may not all be of her mind."

With that, he turned and passed from view along the ravine, and Monsieur Vignolles, a moment later, made his way up the hill toward Marcelle's cabin.

Had he not been so preoccupied, he must have seen the crouching, half-running figure that passed him scarce a score paces on his left and the flitting green shadow that followed warily behind. He then would have marvelled—however, he did not see; nor was he delivered from his abstraction till he had come to the open space before the cabin, and saw the Lady Agathe as she walked there.

She looked up quickly on his approach, and acknowledged his bow with some favour. It was in her mind that here, at least, was a man whose honour was untarnished.

"My lady, I rejoice to see that the trials of yesterday have left no traces upon the fairness you possess," he began. "Since the face but reflects the mind, may I commend you for bearing this extremity so bravely."

"I thank you, monsieur," she answered, "but the term o'ershoots the case somewhat, since my trial has been less than would appear, and my state now is not one of extremity."

"Yet strange and distasteful it must be, my lady," said Monsieur Vignolles in some wonder at her com-

posed tone. "It is to release you from such position that I come to you now. I know not whether you are aware of it, but Marcelle has set us both free."

"Yes, Monsieur Vignolles, I know."

Again that calm cadence in her voice that puzzled him.

"I see that I give you no news, my lady; let me proffer you better," he said. "It was with the faint hope that some such chance would offer that I came hither. Because of some whim, I know not what, Marcelle has thought best to free us. Let us not lose the opportunity, my lady. Come, without losing a moment, come! The others, even the women, are now at the camp eating, and we shall have a most excellent start before they discover our absence."

"If the others are at the camp, it is because Marcelle herself sent them there," she answered quietly.

"Then would she give us a free field. Saints, I pretend not to understand the woman!" he said quickly. "But come, my lady; the distance I have to escort you is naught that you may not cover on foot, and I'll answer for your safety with my life—better than I did yesterday," he added bitterly.

"And where, then, would you conduct me, monsieur?" she asked with no trace of eagerness in her voice.

"To a house scarce three leagues distant, where a woman shall attend upon your wants, and you may remain till some disposition be made for your journey to Dauphiné. Even now the Sieur Giraud is on his way thither, to arrange for your reception."

"Ah!"

There was interest enough in her tone now.

"And where—whose house is this to which you

would take me?" she added, with an apparent struggle to be calm.

"A humble abode it is for you, my lady, yet 'twill serve your needs, and your stay there will be but short, I trust. 'Tis the house of a vine-grower, one Meux by name, who——"

He checked himself of a sudden at the look of horror which had swept into her face; but ere he might ask its cause, she cried:

"You say that the Sieur Giraud d'Orson has—has gone to that house this day?"

"Since it is true, why may I not say so, my lady?" he said, and would have spoken more but that she waved him off.

"Then do you listen to me, Monsieur Vignolles!" she cried. "Speak no longer of my escape; it is of no moment, and I would not go in any event. But what goes on at that vine-grower's house to-day may well be worth your attention. I see that you, in truth, are in the dark."

"My lady, I know not what you mean. I—I——"

"You have seen naught behind this excuse for absence the Sieur Giraud has made you?" she cut in. "You believe that he has gone thither on my behalf. I tell you, they plan to do a man to death at that house to-day, and that man the Count de Charolais."

"My God, my Lady Agathe, you rave! You have suffered too much from——"

"I tell you, it is true; I had the plan from Marcelle herself. The guiding hand belongs to some traitor in Count Charles's own camp at Namur; but one of these Companions will be the actual instrument, unless the design is balked."

"Count Charles to be murdered!" cried Monsieur

Vignolles hoarsely. "And you would believe the Sieur Giraud capable of having a hand in *that*, my lady? Then I wonder no longer that you should have turned so suddenly against him. But 'tis folly; 'tis wrong to harbour such thoughts."

"I harbour no thoughts till I have proof they are warranted, monsieur; and, God knows, I have had proof enough! One other among these Companions is in the plot—one calling himself Crépin Brune—and they have inveigled Count Charles into coming to the vine-grower's by promises of delivering over one Gaspard Lenoir, whom he seeks to lay hands on. Which of them deals the death-blow is small matter. Count Charles will come to his death in answer to a letter of the Sieur Giraud d'Orson; that I know, for with my own ears I heard the Sieur Giraud speak with Crépin concerning it."

Monsieur Vignolles began to be affected by her assurance. The Sieur Giraud had spoken vaguely with him of some possible return to favour. Could he have meant that such would be his reward for his part in the undoing of Count Charles? That there were those who would gladly so reward him Monsieur Vignolles made no doubt. Moreover, he knew but little of the Sieur Giraud; ne'er had laid eyes on him till they had met at Namur, and all things were possible for a man so fallen. Yet it grated upon him to think this, for he had greatly esteemed the Sieur Giraud, and his was a liking that, once roused, was not lightly thrown aside.

"My lady, methinks you would be the last one to accuse any man falsely, much less the Sieur Giraud," he said finally. "You say you had this tale from Marcelle?"

"Yes, word by word, as I fairly dragged it from her last night, and as she herself had overheard Crépin

and another arrange it," answered the Lady Agathe. "Her own part in the consummation of the plan was not active; but she——"

She broke off suddenly.

"I will not tell you more of that, monsieur," she said.

"So be it; I've heard enough, methinks, my lady. Adieu!"

Monsieur Vignolles's voice was scarce raised in pitch, yet he spoke with decision and spun round upon his heel.

"You are going, monsieur?" cried the Lady Agathe; and he paused a moment to fling back over his shoulder:

"To the house of the vine-grower, ay, my lady; there to know the truth or nail the lie in all this. God rest I be not too late!"

With that, he slipped swiftly away, and only the nodding undergrowth showed where he had passed through the great green barrier.

CHAPTER XI

UNDER THE GREAT BALD KNOLL

IF, for any reason, a man had taken boat from Namur and had ascended the Meuse for some three leagues, he would have covered about half the distance to Dinant, and ahead of him would have loomed a jutting point marking a great bend in the river. If he had run the nose of his craft upon the near side of this point and stepped ashore, the scarred summit of the Great Bald Knoll would have seemed fairly to overhang his head. Yet this proximity was apparent rather than real, for had the man drawn full bow and discharged a shaft straight at the frowning crag, the missile would have fallen short, assuming him to have been a bowman of average skill and strength. Had he then sought to recover the spent shaft, he first must have penetrated the dense growth of underbrush lining the banks of the stream; then some scrubby pines merging into the forest proper; and finally would have come upon a woodland trail wide enough, perchance, to allow of two horsemen riding abreast. Somewhere on the other side of this trail, and between it and the steep side of the Great Bald Knoll, he would have come upon his arrow, and in so doing, would have found himself trespassing upon the holding of Meux, the vine-grower. He might have found it in the dense wood lining the winding path that led to the very portal of that worthy's house, or, perchance, it might have o'ershot that mark and sought rest among the straggling vines upon the base hillside.

At all events, thus had nature dealt with the surroundings of the vine-grower's abode, in front spreading vegetation with no niggardly hand, and behind rearing a rocky hillside, where the clearing axe of man had found little to do. The sorry-looking vines testified to the barrenness of the soil and seemed to subsist irresolute between life and death. Nor was the house itself out of keeping with the general aspect of wretchedness and decay. A weather-stained, two-roomed hut it was, nestling against the hillside, its roof partly of tiles, partly of rough thatch, and its door sagging drunkenly upon rotting leather hinges. Obviously, improvidence and want in equal portions must account for such squalor.

However that might be, on this day the lord of this shabby domain was not here to enter a defence against such charge. He had gone with the breaking of day to Dinant, there to learn in the gossip of the streets the latest developments in that turbulent town, and such tidings as might be had from the army of Count Charles; incidentally, to expend a few *derniers* in the replenishment of his depleted larder. The smoke, which from time to time poured in varying volume through the tile-bound hole in the roof, bore witness to the presence of some one within.

It wanted an hour of mid-day when the door swung open and that some one was revealed in the person of a bent and wizened old woman, who stood for a moment in the opening. Then she hobbled without and, wringing the water from some clothing she carried on her arm, proceeded to spread the pieces to dry upon the rank weeds bordering the house. That done, she turned and looked a moment along the path, shading her blinking eyes from the sun; not that she expected the return of her spouse before nightfall, but because it had become

a habit with her, that last survey before returning indoors.

No living thing met her gaze save a jackdaw which passed in noisy flight over the trees, and, satisfied in mind, she re-entered and the door creaked to behind her.

Yet, had she ventured a little down the footway, she might have seen the cause of the jackdaw's disquiet, for it was at this precise moment that Crépin Brune crept softly into the tangle of thicket at the pathside.

Some time he spent in treading down a space wherein he might lie and in arranging the leafy branches so that he had clear view down the path. Then, being at length content with his preparations, he ran his hand caressingly along the twisted deerskin forming the cord of his bow, and silently tested the latter's spring. Which done, he extended himself prone in his lair, a handful of keen-headed shafts at his elbow. There was small need of so many, since he would have but one shot, but the man, being at heart a craven, found that their very numbers, as he fingered them, served to bolster up his courage.

As he lay thus, his breath came and went like the panting of a dog, for he had come far at a rapid pace and the day was hot. Like to the manner of a dog, too, was the sudden stoppage of his breathing as a rustle fell upon his ears from behind. His hand flew to the knife at his belt and he turned with a kind of forced and dogged courage to meet whatever danger threatened him. Even so may cowardice, pressed to extremity, take on the aspect of daring.

Ere he might think twice, the growth behind him parted and Marcelle crept into view.

The arm and its poised blade fell, and his hand shook, now that the sudden tension was ended.

"Marcelle! What saint or devil has brought you here?" he cried under his breath.

"No saint, nor yet any devil, Crépin; but only the great longing within me to see the end of this affair," she answered.

She, too, was breathing hard, and as she drew near to him he saw the wild gleam in her eyes.

"The end of what affair?" he said. "Bah; one would think you ne'er had seen a roebuck take his death-leap——"

"Oh, Crépin Brune, a truce to your lies! Does one stalk the deer in such spot as this and with the wind upon one's back? Have done! Well enough I know why you are here; well enough for whom one of those shafts is intended, since you and that other would discuss the very plan with only a thicket between where you sat and where I lay. Thus you hoped to scheme behind my back; to reap the whole reward and fame. But no; the Fates ruled otherwise, and I am here."

As she spoke, Crépin's rage rose hot within him at thought of how he had betrayed himself, yet he fought it down, for he knew not how much of the plot she had overheard, and would not yield at this first word of hers.

"I know not what meeting 'tis you pretend to have seen, or what schemes you think to have heard," he said sullenly. "But whatever they be, they have naught to do with my being here; nor can you give me instruction in the chase of deer; for 'tis across this very path here that the king of all the roebucks is wont to make his way to the water-hole a hundred paces distant. I had it from old Meux himself. As for the wind you speak of, there is none."

In truth, there was but little, yet what there was set the way Marcelle had said.

"By my faith, Crépin, you are greater fool than I thought, and methinks I might well give you the very instruction you lack!" she answered. "It well accounts for the fact that ne'er have you furnished deer meat to the camp that you should think to delude me with such tale. One seeks the roebuck at this hour of day lying in the heaviest shade; they move not abroad, either for food or water, under such sun. Moreover, are you given to naming your quarry of a sudden, that this particular king of them all should be called the Count de Charolais? If so, what names bear those others who rendezvous at noon on the Great Bald Knoll yonder? Bah, you fool; do you not see I know all?"

And now, indeed, Crépin did curse himself, and half aloud, for not having beaten the wood with greater care before discussing this venture.

"And if it be true, what then?" he muttered savagely. "Get you gone from here, Marcelle! Whether you be my chief or no, I have work to do and no time nor wish for chatter." And added grudgingly, "As for what may come to me if the trick works, you shall have your share."

"What care I for share in your wretched gold!" answered Marcelle, her eyes burning upon his. "Think you that I have followed you hither for any other purpose than to be in at the death of him you wait for? Did I not keep silent as to what I knew, fearful that if you suspected it, the plan would be altered and I so deprived of this satisfaction?"

"So it was but to see the stroke delivered that you came, eh, Marcelle?" asked Crépin, his gaze fixed upon her face and a strange light in his eyes, which caused her inwardly to shudder.

She had seen that same light there once before and

long ago, when Crépin had first joined the band and had thought to see in her fair prey. Not long had he been in learning his mistake, and since then had taken good care to follow the narrow way she had left him. She had not forgotten, but had believed it a thing of the past, yet now she was again confronted by that same look she had seen in his face before—a look that transformed the man into something bestial. She trembled, but spoke bravely enough.

"It was for that alone I came, Crépin. Surely, I have done enough to merit such right."

He rose toward her on his elbow, and in so doing the upper half of the long bow beneath him was twisted into view. She started at the sight, yet sheer horror of what she read in his eyes held her speechless.

"By God, you are beautiful enough this day to madden a saint, Marcelle!" he muttered hoarsely. "Ay, and beautiful enough to deserve death were you cruel to a man."

She shrank from the arm he stretched toward her and her hand fell upon the bow-head and its taut-drawn string, and again she started. Now was her time if only—and then sheer terror of the man forced the words from her and the blood fled in panic from her face.

"Have a care, Crépin!"

He sprang upon her.

"Ah, you would, eh, you little devil!" he cried harshly in her ear, and with a wrench tore the small horn-cased knife from her hand, even as it left her bosom.

"Small, forsooth, yet no pleasing thing to have between one's ribs. I choose it rather without than within me," he added grimly, and dropped it inside his jerkin. "So you would have knifed me in a second more, Mar-

celle? By my faith, one would do best to woo such a termagant at sword's point!"

And Marcelle answered not; nor, in truth, could she have done so surely, since she knew not whether she had meant to turn the blade against the tense line beneath her hand or this man's heart. Fear had forced the drawing of the weapon—fear and that savagery that so becomes a woman who defends her honour—and now she had not helped herself, nor performed the mission upon which she had come. She was distracted and the look upon her face one of piteous despair, yet would she fight back and with weapons perchance more formidable than the one she had lost, weapons double-edged with a fierce cunning and hatred.

"Ha! You have not now so much to say for yourself, Marcelle!" growled Crépin. "Nay; nor will you e'er again have Crépin Brune flogged for your pleasure, for with this day's work he becomes greater than you and all the band together."

His voice again grew thick as he approached nearer to her; but this time she did not shrink, and by almost superhuman spirit forced herself to bear his look.

"And you think to despise me; to look on the feeling I have for you as beneath you," he went on ravingly, and seized her arm. "By God, you shall soon know what it is to beg favours of me, Marcelle! You'll not draw back as though from the plague when I take you in my arms, so, and——"

But here she thrust him violently from her, ere he thought of such a move, for he believed her half-won.

"And if it be so?" she cried quickly. "If I might some time find a liking for you, is this time, this place, fit for lovemaking, Crépin? And if while so engaged the Count de Charolais goes free, in what position are you

then? Must I, a woman, remind you of a man's work? Enough of this, if you would win any favour in my eyes!"

He looked at her sharply, but she met his gaze fairly.

"You are right, Marcelle," he said. "It is a compact, then, between us. If I succeed, you promise——"

"If you succeed in the killing of the Count de Charolais, I promise you that ne'er again will Marcelle deny your desires."

He laughed.

"And a moment ago you would have done for me!"

"I might have struck; yes! You expect too much for nothing. Such favour as you may desire let me see you gain, here with my own eyes."

He pondered a moment, then answered gruffly:

"Let it be so, then; you shall stay! Yet shall our bargain be pledged with a caress from those lips of yours, Marcelle, for 'twill hearten me for the work in hand."

For an instant he held her passionately to him and pressed his bearded lips heavily upon her own cold ones. Then with a low cry of pleasure turned from her and set himself to his task of watching the path through the opening he had made.

Marcelle fell back and buried her face in the trodden-down twigs and leaves, till naught showed of her face under her black mane of hair. Her form shook convulsively, and Crépin, turning his head a moment, shrugged his shoulders derisively, but said no word. Women were women, he argued, and must have their fits of weeping. What concerned him was that she had yielded at last to his will.

He would scarce have been so content with his victory had he been less jubilant and observed more

closely, for beneath that screen of tousled hair a perfect set of the whitest teeth were gnawing a bow-string to a thread. Thus had Marcelle imposed upon him, yet there was no measure of simulation in the bitter tears she shed, nor in the sobs that shook her with such cruel shame.

So it was that Crépin, intent on watching the path below, and Marcelle engaged upon her task, neither saw the Sieur Giraud as he came from the wood on the upper side and, walking quickly to the house, threw open the door and entered.

The shadows had scarce altered their positions when Crépin, of a sudden, fell swiftly back from his vantage point and, with a finger on his lips, touched Marcelle on the shoulder.

"Quick, quick, Marcelle! Yonder comes our man, and prompt to the very hour!"

Indeed the sun now blazed fairly overhead.

Crépin seized his bow, and Marcelle was perforce obliged to leave her task undone, yet where she had gnawed the bow-string was reduced to a mere fibre, and she prayed that it might not snap too soon with the strain upon it. Perchance, all had been for the best, for had she cut the string, as first intended, Crépin must have discovered it. That would have meant the death to which she had thought to come in following him hither; now—but why speculate upon this very pressing future. She feared lest Crépin, who had fitted shaft to string, would draw silent bow to test its strength. But he was too absorbed in watching the approach of his prey for any other thought, and, moreover, had thoroughly tested his weapon but a little time before. He crouched, cat-like, behind his cover, and, fascinated with the strange horror of the moment, Marcelle seemed rooted behind him. An

overwhelming impulse was upon her to fly, yet she could not move.

And now she, too, could see Count Charles as he came swinging up the path, blocking it completely with his massive body. No armour did he wear save a coat of plated mail that shone dazzlingly in the sunlight, where the overlying tunic left some part exposed. Yet this tunic was scarcely less brilliant. Sable though it was in hue, its heavy embroideries of gold and its great crimson and gold Cross of St. Andrew glittered resplendently. Great boots drawn well up his hose testified to his having been but recently in the saddle, and a huge sword, such as only a man of his stature might wield, hung at his side. Beneath his jewelled and plumed cap his face, reddened by the sun, stood out in all its boasted assurance. Well had they named this man Charles the Bold, for in the very careless stride he affected was a fearlessness beyond compare.

He came straight onward, with his eyes fixed on the house before him, and Marcelle saw that he would pass Crépin scarce the length of his body away.

Of a sudden Crépin straightened, and jerked the bow above the brush before him. At the same instant the door of the house creaked open noisily, and the Sieur Giraud appeared in the opening.

"Ha!" cried Count Charles, and, even on his word, Crépin drew quick bow.

"Pht!"

The shaft remained fast in Crépin's hand, and the parted string cut lightly across his face. A mad curse burst from his lips.

Count Charles spun about on his heel—for it had been Crépin's plan to strike him from behind—and, with an oath, ripped his blade free of its sheath.

But Crépin waited not his onslaught. Flinging the shaft and bow desperately at Count Charles, he turned and fled incontinently through the forest.

Marcelle lay expecting the death-thrust with every rapid flutter of her heart.

And now, to complete the picture, Monsieur Vignolles burst from the wood before the house and stood gaping, open-mouthed, from Count Charles to the Sieur Giraud. The former had made no attempt to follow Crépin, well knowing he might not hope to overtake him, handicapped as he was by dress, but had again turned savagely upon the Sieur Giraud.

"So there *was* some trick behind this, as I was warned," he roared, "and you, Sieur Giraud, you and this whelp of the constable's were behind it! Then, by Heaven, you shall pay for it!"

He drew a small golden whistle from his tunic and sounded a long blast, that went echoing in all directions.

In an instant the heights of the Great Bald Knoll swarmed with men, and they came sprawling down through the vines, their arms flashing fire in the sun.

"Ha! You thought the Lion would come to the Sheep for slaughter with never a care, did you?" cried Count Charles mockingly, and shook the bow and shaft at them.

The Sieur Giraud took a step forward and cried:

"My lord, I know naught——"

"And now you would fain deny the very evidence before me!" shouted Count Charles madly. "Once did I let you go, but, by God and Our Lady, this time shall you hang high as the highest tree may swing such offal!"

As he ended he made a rush at the two with upraised sword, while the clatter of the men behind grew nearer.

Monsieur Vignolles, who had watched all wonderingly, now leaped to the Sieur Giraud's side.

"You know naught of this attack upon Count Charles!" he gasped hurriedly.

"Attack!" muttered the Sieur Giraud dazedly.

"No; by my faith, that you do not!" cried Monsieur Vignolles. "Come, then, man, I may yet save you."

He seized the other by the arm and dragged him bodily into the wood.

"Follow me as though all hell was loose after you, for so it is," he cried, as Count Charles plunged from the path after them.

But in his raging haste the count took no note of a running root, and they heard him come heavily to earth. Then, as they ran, they became conscious that another ran with them, and they both whirled about to ward off such pursuer.

It was Marcelle. She had fled, even as they had, and scarce knowing or caring whither she went. By chance, they had taken the same direction; but now she was exhausted, and might not go another step. As they turned upon her she sank to the ground, a palpitating little heap.

"Let the cursed wench go!" cried Monsieur Vignolles, while the noise of pursuit came ever nearer. "'Tis she who has been at the bottom of this devilry, I'll be sworn, else why is she here? Come, man, I have horses near at hand—stolen they are, in truth, as I came hither, but I thought they might serve my lady later, and what matters it? Ne'er will they be of greater service than now. Come!"

Marcelle opened her eyes and looked up into the face of the Sieur Giraud; then lowered her gaze as quickly. She could not bear the look in his eyes.

"Come, man, let this Marcelle pay for her frolic! They are almost upon us!" cried Monsieur Vignolles.

The Sieur Giraud roused suddenly to action.

"No; I will not believe it after what she has said to me this day. I will not leave her, monsieur."

And with that he picked her up as he might have a child and ran onward, and his feet seemed lighter, despite the burden.

How they came to the horses in only the nick of time, mounted and rode away, twisting, turning, and doubling through such open trails as they found before them, till all pursuit had been left far behind and they might relax their pace, is scarce of moment.

What is noteworthy, though, is that, as they rode slowly back into the hills near Dinant, Monsieur Vignolles, perchance smitten with the harshness of his recent words toward Marcelle, on offering to relieve the Sieur Giraud of his burden, was met by a sharp refusal.

And this bluntness, considering what he had done for the Sieur Giraud, struck Monsieur Vignolles as being ungrateful, to say the least.

CHAPTER XII

GONE!

IT was mid-afternoon when they reached the ravine below the camp and dismounted, the Sieur Giraud lowering Marcelle to the ground. Many a blessing had he invoked upon the head of Tite as they had ridden thither, for the good beasts which had borne them to safety were none others than those which had fallen to Tite from the bishop's messenger. Unable to dispose of them to his satisfaction, Tite had kept them picketed in favourable feeding places about the camp, and it was in one of these spots that Monsieur Vignolles, speeding with all haste to the vine-grower's, had come upon them. Their harness he remembered to have seen in Tite's burrow, and he had succeeded in laying hands on it without being observed.

But now, even as they set about unsaddling and re-picketing the horses, Tite suddenly broke from the wood upon them. His face was red, and the sweat had soaked through his jerkin till it was one great stain.

"So, 'tis you who steal a man's belongings with ne'er so much as 'by your leave'!" he cried, his grizzled brows drawn into angry furrows. "The devil's chase have I had in search of——"

He broke off suddenly as he saw Marcelle for the first time.

"And you, Marcelle; what have you to do with such knavish work?" he growled.

Ere she might answer Monsieur Vignolles turned on him and said quickly:

"Let her alone, old Whitehead. Other knavish work she may be concerned in, but this is none of it. I took your horses—though, in truth, I knew not they were yours—and they suffer no harm from the little jaunt they've had. So, if you've anything to say, say it to me, and, if you'd fight over it, I am at your service directly I've made this brute fast."

Tite made an angry stride toward him, but Marcelle raised her hand.

"Stop, Tite; you know not what you do. For the taking of your property I alone shall answer, and for your trouble you shall be well paid."

He looked at her in silence a moment; then said gruffly:

"I want no dispute with you, Marcelle; and if you rule that any young jackanapes can pilfer the very bed from under me, I say so be it this time. But if I catch him at it again, you will not be troubled to interfere."

"Nor shall I, Tite, since it will not happen again," replied Marcelle. "I may tell you no more, save that these beasts have to-day saved three lives, methinks."

"One being your own?" he asked quickly.

"I make no doubt of that, but question me no further, for I may not answer."

Tite shook his head slowly.

"No; I'll inquire no more into your affairs. By St. Hubert, there's much goes on in this camp that a man is best blind to! Say no further word of this, then, nor of pay for any plague of mine, since your life was concerned. To say truth, methought 'twas the work of those curs below, though they should scarce have rallied by now from the welting you gave them, Sieur Giraud."

The Sieur Giraud wheeled quickly.

"And how know you that they have rallied?" he asked in some surprise, for he had thought to have dealt that band a lasting blow.

"Because, this morning, Poncet saw the camp of some threescore of them not half a league down the valley; and, within the hour, I nearly ran into the same nest while looking for the horses. 'Tis my notion they only wait for help from over the river to set upon us. When they come, 'twill be no child's play, for, thanks to you, they'll have a heavy score to settle."

The Sieur Giraud nodded thoughtfully. As for Monsieur Vignolles, he wheeled about with a dancing light in his eyes.

"Do my ears hear aright, that you speak of a fight, old Whitehead?" he cried. "Faith, as little scruple would I have in bearing arms against you as for you; but since I am here, and the very smell of it in the air, I cast my lot with you! I have done naught but dance to the strum of your bow-string since coming here, and I would have a hand if these other thieves are to perform."

Tite smiled grimly. These were the men, this Sieur Giraud and Monsieur Vignolles, whom he valued at their proper worth when it came to fighting. They were bred to it, while he and the others had been driven to forsake the implements of trade for the bow. He did not think the less of Monsieur Vignolles for his failure to protect the Lady Agathe against him and nine others. However, he only said bluntly:

"And if you were armed, monsieur, what surety would there be you would not turn upon us? What say you, Marcelle?"

"That I would take the word of Monsieur Vignolles," she answered quickly. "If we are set upon, we shall need all the force we may muster."

"I thank you. My word you shall have, then, for this engagement," answered Monsieur Vignolles, bowing shortly. "Yet I will give you no pledge, nor will I fight under your badge, for 'tis for my own diversion I join you and not from any liking for you."

The time had been, not long before, when Marcelle would have taken this speech in different fashion. Now she merely bowed, and answered quietly:

"I understand. Tite, restore to Monsieur Vignolles such of his arms as he may desire."

Tite remained for a moment, looking fixedly at her, then shook himself and, picking up the harness, beckoned Monsieur Vignolles to follow.

As they went up the hill together, the Sieur Giraud spoke. His quiet tone hardly reflected the turmoil within him.

"And now, Marcelle, I am waiting."

She started, yet she had known it was coming. The woman in her made her seek to stave off the inevitable.

"Waiting, Sieur Giraud? For what——"

"Have done with foolery, Marcelle; I am in no mood for it! This day have I seen murder attempted, foul murder that failed, methinks, only because the wretch who would have done it lost heart at the last moment."

"Lost heart?" she gasped.

"Ay, lost heart; nor am I surprised thereat, since 'twas likely none other than that knave Crépin—but why go over it all again? Think you I am longer blind to the way I have been tricked, and that I know not it was some tampering with my letter that brought Count Charles to the vine-grower's? Why, I could see he looked for me just before the shot—if shot it can be called—and he accused me of laying the trap in a way that leaves no doubt."

"Am I to be charged with all that Crépin may do?" she asked, fighting for time to think. All the way through the forest had she been thinking, yet had not been able to settle on any plan.

"I am not charging you with all that Crépin may have done," he replied sternly. "I am not so short of memory as to have forgotten already what you said of Count Charles—what you tried to make me say regarding his death—yonder at my post on the hills."

"That—that was before," she said brokenly.

"Ay, and should have opened my eyes wider, but I believed it but mad rage that prompted your words. This morning, when I spoke to you of going away, of the release of the Lady Agathe, methought that ne'er had I seen any woman more kind and gentle, and—but why bring that back when at the very moment you were acting the lie? You, it was; you, it must have been, who, with some false tale, turned my lady against me, and all because the very devil within you twists you from good impulse to bad as the wind veers to the four points."

"I had naught to do with the Lady Agathe's refusal to see you, nor did I suspect her distrust of you till she did so," answered Marcelle.

He started. Was it possible that the Lady Agathe had in some way learned of the plot against Count Charles?

"You know what it was my lady held against me!" he cried sharply. "Had it to do with this affair at the vine-grower's?"

She made no reply, for her brain was whirling. What should she do? Should she confess all? Oh! How dearly would she love to tell this man of the part she had played, yet——

Again his harsh words broke in upon her thoughts.

"So it did have to do with this dastardly plan. And you—you, Marcelle, knowing I had naught to do with it, let my lady believe in my guilt. Ha! And so you would, fearing lest my lady and I should meet and she tell me all. God knows, she would have done so, for ne'er was truer heart than hers."

His words stung her cruelly. Always, always it was this praise of the other she must hear from him. Not that she longer hated the Lady Agathe; in truth, she would have resented any reproach cast upon her, but to have the Sieur Giraud so extol her goodness was unbearable.

"Yes, the Lady Agathe, in truth, would have told you all," she said bitterly, and, with the words, put behind her all thought of confession. Hers had been the hand which had averted this crime, yet what would he see in that save the use of the humble instrument. To the other would go all his praise.

The Sieur Giraud had been pacing up and down restlessly, and now stopped before her.

"You admit having kept my lady deceived," he said. "There is but one deduction; you wished for the success of this plot and were there to see it consummated. My God, had I believed that—had I been sure of that—I would have left you lying where you fell back there!"

He paused, and, removing his cap, tore from it the green shoot that adorned it.

"I would not be thought to have less scruple than Monsieur Vignolles," he said coldly, and dropped it at her feet; then turned on his heel.

All things seemed growing black around her, and she swayed till her hand found the support of a tree.

"You are going—for ever?" she gasped.

A moment he paused and looked back.

"I am going to learn what I may from Monsieur Vignolles; then, to acquit myself in the eyes of my Lady Agathe," he said, and in a moment was gone.

Marcelle closed her eyes, and for some time leaned heavily against the tree. Then of a sudden she roused and, with a startled cry, flew up the hill. But one thing was now in her mind. This meeting of the Sieur Giraud and the Lady Agathe must be prevented; never could she suffer that.

"Poor Marcelle! Nobly have you acquitted yourself this day; splendid your willingness to die that another might live; sublime your conquest of that evil impulse within you! Yet the light that you have seen has been but a passing flare; the chastening of your wild spirit has but begun, and uncurbed passion in full flood sweeps away your better self. Take heed, lest you o'erstep the brink of that dark chasm whereon you totter! Take heed lest this glimpse you have caught of the breaking dawn be blotted out for ever in the darkness of that pit!"

Thus did a voice whisper in her ears as she ran on toward her cabin; yet she heard it as though from afar, and the frenzied passion that possessed her was very near.

She came upon the Lady Agathe seated upon the end of a prostrate pine, and, at sight of her, pulled up sharply; for covering the fair figure of my lady was now the green velvet bodice and kirtle of a Companion. From the spray of green in her hair to the tips of her thong-bound toes the Lady Agathe, in dress, was a replica of Marcelle herself. At her side, with her head bent in critical approval, stood Petite Maman, and, indeed, even in so short a time, she and the others had fashioned this attire quite to their satisfaction. Per-

chance it followed not so closely the curves of the figure as did Marcelle's; but the Lady Agathe had always a way of bearing her attire that was ample reward to those whose handiwork it was.

As she saw Marcelle she sprang up with a cry of relief.

"You—you have succeeded, Marcelle?" she asked anxiously. "You see, I have been true to my word, and have pledged it in this dress."

Marcelle did not answer her at once, but said to the other:

"You have done well, Petite Maman, and I am pleased with the speed you have shown. Know you where Poncet or André may be found?"

"Poncet I saw going toward the camp but a few moments ago, Marcelle," answered the woman. "As for André, he is in the hills with most of the others, watching those rogues from over the river."

"Do you search for and bring Poncet hither; ay, and one other of the band, it matters not whom. And go with all haste upon the errand."

"As soon as they may be found they shall be here, if I have to bring them one under each arm," answered Petite Maman, and departed in the direction of the camp.

Marcelle turned to the Lady Agathe.

"You should have more care how you speak before others, Agathe," she said, and tossed her head toward the retreating figure.

"I know—I know, and am sorry; but the words escaped me ere I thought," cried the Lady Agathe. "But now, speak, Marcelle! In pity's name, relieve my anxiety. You have succeeded? Count Charles lives?"

"Count Charles lives; yes, I have seen to that, Agathe."

In an instant the other had thrown her arms about Marcelle, and was breathing soft and broken words of relief and thanks into her ears. As for Marcelle, she seemed to suffer the embrace rather than find pleasure in it; but the Lady Agathe noticed this not at all in her own joy.

"Thank God, that danger is past!" she said. "Oh, Marcelle, what a wondrous power you are in these Ardennes! Tell me—tell me how you have accomplished what no other might have done."

Here, indeed, was praise and recognition, yet Marcelle betrayed no gratification. She had nerved herself not to do so, and she answered shortly enough:

"Agathe, bid me not rehearse what has gone before. Enough that you know I have kept my trust with you, and that my hand saved Count Charles from the certain death that menaced him. Crépin it was who would have done him to death, had his bow-string been more sound."

"And—and the Sieur Giraud, you—you saw him there, at the vine-grower's?"

"Yes, he was there," answered Marcelle quickly. "But come, Agathe, another time will answer for details, and——"

"Did Count Charles see the Sieur Giraud?" persisted the other.

"Ay, and set upon him with drawn sword, so that he must have fallen had not Monsieur Vignolles——"

She paused suddenly. In a moment more she would have told the Lady Agathe that which would have convinced her of the Sieur Giraud's innocence.

"Oh, ask me not to say what took place," she went

on rapidly. "There was much shouting and cursing—soldiers rushing down the hillside, and then we were chased like deer through the forest till we shook them off and made our way here."

"Then the Sieur Giraud escaped?" cried the Lady Agathe.

"Ay; he is safe enough and Monsieur Vignolles as well," answered Marcelle. "But I tell you, Agathe, there is no time for going over all this. You have had your wish, and the Count de Charolais will live, perchance to butcher us all some day. You heard what Petite Maman said of the men watching the band from over the river. 'Tis the same band that the Sieur Giraud and some of our men fought yesterday. They have recruited their strength to three-score and are close upon us, and when they come, this will be no place for you. You must leave the camp at once."

The Lady Agathe's heart fluttered tumultuously, for the mere thought of fighting filled her with fear and dread. Yet she assumed a courage she was far from feeling.

"Leave the camp, Marcelle? What mean you, and even did I do so, where should I go?"

"That I have arranged," answered Marcelle. "At any hour now, by night or day, these others may be upon us. Perchance we shall beat them off, but, in any event, you shall not remain to take that risk. Yonder, scarce an hour's walk through the valley, lies Dinant. There you will be safe. Poncet and the other for whom I have sent will lead you thither, and you should be within the walls before the gates are closed, if you start at once. I will send with you Petite Maman and Bonne Fleuron, who will conduct you to a house where you will be well cared for, and there will remain with you. If those who attack

us do not gain the upper hand, I myself shall come to you ere long."

"But I would prefer remaining here, Marcelle! I would rather share such fortune as may befall you, now that I have entered upon it."

"And I say that I will not have you here!" cried Marcelle, stamping her foot. "You have no part in this hill strife; and what, in truth, could you do to help? Can you draw bow and be sure your shaft will find its mark? No; nor can you see the difference between the forest shadows and those flitting ones that betoken the foe in the half-light of evening. These things we, who have lived in these hills, can do, and so we stay. That I send the two women with you means the loss of two good bows; yet go you shall, and at once!"

There was no denying the decision in her tone. In truth, the Lady Agathe might have refused absolutely; but at heart she still feared this girl whose will seemed law; and, moreover, she felt that Marcelle had softened toward her and was thinking only of her welfare. If this had not been enough to decide her, the service Marcelle had done that day would have sufficed.

The Lady Agathe rose.

"I will go," she said simply, and then added quickly, "And Monsieur Vignolles, he—he remains here?"

Marcelle looked at her sharply, but the Lady Agathe's face was averted.

"You will scarce expect me to send more men than are needed," said Marcelle. "Even Poncet and the other must return with all speed. As for Monsieur Vignolles, he will lend us too strong a hand to be spared."

She swung about nervously at sound of footsteps behind her; but it was only Petite Maman with Poncet and Moïse, and she again turned hastily to the Lady Agathe.

"Make a bundle of your clothing and they shall carry it; and waste no time," she said sharply, and the Lady Agathe ran to the cabin and disappeared within the entrance.

Marcelle turned to the others and spoke shortly but earnestly, while Petite Maman ran to the women's quarters.

When the Lady Agathe emerged with her bundle she found her escort of four awaiting her. The woman, Bonne Fleuron, relieved her of her burden and they started forward quickly. But the Lady Agathe lingered a moment.

"Good-bye, Marcelle, and God keep you from harm!" she said. "What you do is for my profit, I know, and thank you for it. You will come soon to Dinant?"

"I shall come soon to Dinant if—but you know, Agathe; go—go quickly!"

And with that they took up their way along the ridge and the wood swallowed them up.

Marcelle remained an instant looking after them; then with a quick-drawn breath plunged into the forest back of the cabin.

It was a full half-hour later when the Sieur Giraud and Monsieur Vignolles came hurriedly into the little clearing before the cabin. They had had much to discuss, and the Sieur Giraud had learned all that the other knew. This time he showed no scruple, but strode quickly to the entrance.

"My Lady Agathe," he called softly, and on receiving no response, repeated the cry in a louder voice.

A crow cawed noisily from a near-by treetop as though in derision.

One of the women—Ulrique Cadet, it was—thrust her head from the door of their quarters, some score paces distant.

"The Lady Agathe; I would see her—know you where she may be found?" cried the Sieur Giraud.

The woman laughed coarsely.

"Are you mad, man, that you think to find such as she here with the first whiff of trouble in the air—you, who should know her sort?"

"A pox on your wagging tongue, woman! Where is the Lady Agathe?"

Ulrique found a great pleasure in tantalizing this man whom she felt was above her. It was an opportunity not often vouchsafed her, and therefore she made no haste in answering his angry query.

"If you know not the breed, by my faith, I do well enough!" she mocked. "When all is serene 'tis 'Make way for my lady!' and curtsey to the ground and dodge the horses lest you be trampled underfoot. But let them once scent danger, and 'tis 'Step forward, my good man, or my good woman, and a piece of gold for those you leave behind if you die.' Ha! Trust them to look after——"

"A thousand curses on your gabble!" cried the Sieur Giraud, striding rapidly toward her. "Once more, I ask you where the Lady Agathe may be found."

His look sobered the woman and she withdrew halfway within the hut.

"Would you find her? Seek her then in Dinant, whither she has gone to save her precious skin!" she rasped forth sullenly, and slammed the door in his face.

"Dinant! Gone!"

The Sieur Giraud looked blankly at Monsieur Vignolles.

"Then, by all the saints, will we, too, go to Dinant!" he cried.

His challenging tone was needlessly emphatic. They were both going to Dinant, though not quite in the way he anticipated.

CHAPTER XIII

THE FATES AND CRÉPIN BRUNE

WHATEVER else might be said for or against Crépin—and there was much that fell under the latter head—his knowledge of that part of the Ardennes which he and the Companions roamed was, beyond a doubt, comprehensive.

There had, indeed, been much reason in Marcelle's sneer at his failure to do his share toward supplying the camp kettle, and as a deer-stalker, Crépin was far from being a prodigy. Yet there was scarce a deer-path or runway thereabout that he had not passed over time and again, and, despite Marcelle's scoffing, he had brought many an antlered head to earth. This had been on occasions when long pursuit had not been needful and the game had literally walked to meet its death. That these trophies had never appeared at the camp was true enough, for, above all, Crépin was essentially lazy, and avoided the packing of a deer carcass a league or two as he would have shunned the plague. The choicest cut had sufficed his immediate needs, and the rest he had left to the more energetic scavengers of the forest.

So it was that, equipped with this extensive wood lore, he rapidly left behind the shouting and noise of pursuit, and, first falling into a walk, finally stopped and threw himself full length on the ground. He had nearly doubled on his track, deeming that the safer method.

Till he had regained his breath, he lay quite still,

gazing upward into the leafy vault. He wondered how it had fared with Marcelle, and ground his teeth savagely at thought of how he had lost all that she had promised him; but, most of all, he wondered what had made his bow-string give way in such fashion. Never did it occur to him that to leave the girl as he had was aught but natural. Then he fell to thinking what course was left open to him, and it flashed upon him that it depended on Marcelle's fate alone. If she had been taken, he made no doubt that she had already been swung to a tree, for Count Charles would hang a Companion, man or woman, with never a thought of the sex. That being so, he, Crépin, might venture back to the camp. But suppose she had escaped. In that case better might she hope for pity from Count Charles than Crépin from her, after what had occurred between them and his subsequent failure. However, he believed that she could hardly have got free—for he knew naught of the Sieur Giraud or Monsieur Vignolles being there—and he resolved to approach the camp that night and discover the truth for himself. Meanwhile, he was safe—though bitterly he cursed his luck—and had but to lie quiet until nightfall. Content with his own escape, he kicked his feet lazily in the air.

Often enough the Fates seem to smile upon the designs of a rogue, and doubtless Crépin had precedent to lend weight to his philosophy. But it so chanced that a part of the constable's force, having been delayed in the pursuit of a score of vagabonds they had come upon, were even then hurrying up the river side toward the rendezvous at the Great Bald Knoll. Crépin had naturally enough fled toward the river as being away from that concourse of troops, and now, as he lay revelling in his master-stroke in so eluding them, his ears were

assailed by the noise of this body of men approaching from that very direction.

He leaped to his feet with a curse, and stood a moment hesitating. To run before them was to meet the others. To try either way along the river was to cross open ground where he must be seen. They were close upon him, and he had little time to decide. With a savage growl, as of a tracked beast, he dived head foremost into a copse of brake, and the drooping leaves closed over him.

Here, again, all would have been well had the Fates decreed that these men should be intent only on reaching their appointed place. But it chanced that two archers of the guard, despite their long march, were engaged in buffeting each other about as they proceeded, much to the gratification of their mates. It chanced, also, that, even as they came abreast of the copse of brake, one of them, in leaping aside to avoid the other's blow, came down with both feet upon the leg of the unlucky Crépin.

The tussle was short, for the archers of the constable's guard were no mean fellows. Crépin, jerked to his feet, found himself in the midst of a score grinning faces, yet took little comfort from that pleasing expression of countenance.

"Saints! This is no mean addition to our bag! If I mistake me not, 'tis the badge of the mad wench this knave wears in his cap," cried one who seemed to lead the party.

Crépin, looking farther, now saw a half-dozen despairing wretches tied together, and even as his eyes fell on these other Companions, he was dragged toward them and made secure in like fashion. And now he saw death large before him and whimpered.

"A plague on your whining!" roared the one who

had jumped upon him. "Save your breath, that you may sing while you dance on air. We have a ditty that methinks will serve your purpose."

At which the others laughed uproariously; and some of them prodding the prisoners sharply with their shafts, the party once more took up its march, bellowing a livening song, to which their feet kept pace:

Then ho, for the Forest of Ardennes!
And a curse on the knaves that are free!
The bow-strings are twanging and soon they'll be hanging
To rot on the uppermost tree.
Ha! Ha! On the uppermost tree.

One attempt Crépin made to speak to the archer nearest him, and was rewarded with a blow across the mouth that split his lip against his teeth. After that he shuffled along with the rest quiet enough.

As the company came into the lane before the vine-grower's house, they came full upon Count Charles. He was now mounted and accompanied by a numerous staff, among whom was the constable, though Crépin knew him not. His face was black with rage.

"What brawlers are these who set the wood echoing with their clamour?" cried the count.

He paused suddenly, and his look brightened at sight of the prisoners, while the archers came to a prompt salute.

"Ah, methinks 'tis your company of archers that was missing before, my lord," he said, turning to the Count de St. Pol, and, on the latter acquiescing, spoke sharply to the captain of archers.

"When an hour for rendezvous shall be set, it will behoove you to be more punctual in the future, sir. Yet I see that you have not been idle. Seven to your

net; that makes two-score and three in all; good examples that the wind shall swing in the sight of these fools as an earnest of what is to come. Away with them—yet stay; yonder, with the green emblem in his cap, methinks that is the token of this Marcelle the Mad."

The man's hawk-like eye overlooked nothing.

"So I believe it to be, my lord count," answered the captain. "We took him not with the others, but scarce five-score paces yonder, concealed in a thicket."

Count Charles's eye lighted suddenly.

"Is it so?" he said after a pause, during which he fixed a look on Crépin that sent that worthy's knees knocking together in terror. Then he added to the captain: "Take these others to the top of the Great Bald Knoll and hang them next those you find there. I would not separate them too long, these Companions. Leave this last capture of yours here."

With that the poor wretches set up a wild howling, and grovelled before him for mercy. As well might they have appealed to the very horse he bestrode.

"Away with them!" he said harshly.

And with that the archers laid hold of them and dragged them savagely to their doom, fighting and screaming with such agony that many a man there hitched uneasily in his saddle and exchanged looks with one near him.

Not a muscle of Count Charles's face moved, and he sat his horse as though he were image and not man till the hubbub had subsided into a far-away moan. Then he waved the rest back from him, and beckoned the two archers holding Crépin to bring their prisoner near.

"For you such death as they meet is too good, since you wear that emblem!" he said.

Crépin would have torn the cap from his head save that the guards held his hands.

"But before settling on fit ending for you, I would know what business brought you here this day?" went on Count Charles.

Crépin stammered; he had not had time to concoct a tale.

"The—the—only the chase of a roebuck, my lord; I swear it," he said, and fell to his knees ere the archers could prevent him.

"Raise the fool!" said Count Charles, and the archers jerked him to his feet with small gentleness.

How different was this Count Charles from that unsuspecting man he had tried to shoot down from behind.

"The man lies, my lord count," said one of the archers, "for when we took him he was, as he is now, without arms."

Count Charles started.

"Ha! I'll be sworn I could find a bow that would fit your hand, my man, and that not far from here," he said grimly. "By my faith, 'twas you the Sieur Giraud set to do me to death!"

"No; no, my lord, I swear——"

Crépin broke off suddenly. There was small chance now for him in any event; but if he could shift it all on to the Sieur Giraud's shoulders, perchance——

"My lord, I—I knew not who it was the Sieur Giraud set me to kill; I swear by all the saints! 'Tis not for me to deceive my lord Count de Charolais. I was paid well for the work, and had no thought that it concerned my lord. I am not mad enough for that."

Crépin was feeling his way carefully, and, Count Charles making no move to speak as he paused, continued hurriedly:

"When I first saw you come into the path, and knew it was you, my lord count, or some great personage, I had been hired to do for, I cursed the day I had made such bargain."

"Very good; anything further?" asked Count Charles mockingly. "You cursed, perchance; but you shot, or tried to, nevertheless."

"Because I believed that I ne'er would have been given such work unless I was to be watched, my lord, and little taste have I for such hand as this Sieur Giraud possesses. Somewhere—behind me, in the trees, perchance—I felt that his eye was upon me."

"And there you were right; he was watching you from the house!" exclaimed Count Charles impetuously.

For an instant Crépin was struck dumb with surprise; but he was fighting for his life, and went on with scarce a trace of it in his tone.

"I knew not, my lord; but I could have sworn he would be somewhere near. I dared not run; I dared not shoot. There was but one thing left me. I hacked my bow-string nearly in two and stood up so that he might see me draw bow. Yet the shaft ne'er left my hand. Then, my lord—then I ran."

Count Charles looked at him with piercing gaze. True enough, the bow-string had been nearly severed in one spot; that he had seen for himself, and the tale of a broken bow-string would go far to palliate the man's failure. Not for a moment did Count Charles think of leniency, even if the tale were true. The man should die, like all the rest caught in these hills. Only, he was interested.

As for Crépin, the lie he had put forward had flashed upon him suddenly. That his bow-string had suffered some damage he knew must be true, for he had selected

it with the utmost care and tested it with great thoroughness. An unnoticed and jagged stone, as he had lain upon his bow, might have been responsible, and he had snatched eagerly at the idea as one that might, perchance, save him from the unknown torture he believed awaited him.

A short time Count Charles remained motionless; then swung about in the saddle and beckoned the Count de St. Pol to approach. They spoke together for some moments in low tones so that Crépin caught no word of their talk. Had he not been so preoccupied with his own fear he might have noted the sudden but momentary blanching of the constable's visage as Count Charles first addressed him, and caught the half-apprehensive look the constable shot toward him. But, of course, Crépin had eyes only for his terrible inquisitor, and, moreover, knew not that the other was Louis de Luxembourg, Constable of France. Which, considering Crépin's desperate state of mind, perchance, was as well for the constable.

At length Count Charles turned again to Crépin.

"I know not how much of your tale be true, fellow," he said. "Some of it conforms to what I myself observed; yet, even be it so, the avowal shall not save you. As soon would I spare a venomous reptile that had struck at me, as one of these Companions of the Green Tent; much less one of that cursed mad woman's band. Yet you have somewhat appeased my curiosity, and I would reward you——"

"May the blessing of all the saints—" began Crépin thankfully, his face lighting up quickly.

"—with the same death as the others, in place of that I contemplated," added Count Charles drily, and signalled the archers to remove him.

The constable raised himself in his stirrups as though seeking a more comfortable seat, and smiled.

As the archers took fresh hold of Crépin and started to drag him off, he shrieked with such terror that, in disgust, Count Charles rapped his pommel sharply.

"Bah! you've played the bold rover of the Ardennes with enough swagger, I'll be sworn!" he sneered. "Show a little of that boasted spirit when death confronts you."

"But you would kill me for what another has done!" bawled Crépin shrilly. "'Tis the Sieur Giraud who laid the plot against my lord count; and I—I, Crépin Brune, can deliver him into your hand—ay, and all the band and Marcelle the Mad, herself, if she still lives. But spare me and you shall see, my lord!"

He struggled so desperately that, for a moment, he shook off the guards who held him and stood with trembling hands outstretched toward Count Charles and great drops of clammy sweat upon his face. An instant more and the archers had seized him again, roughly; but Count Charles stayed them with a rapid gesture.

"Ha! That had not occurred to me," he cried. "Yet if 'twere possible, willingly enough would I give you your wretched life in exchange."

"It is possible, my lord count," began Crépin; but the constable had spurred to Count Charles's side and the latter had turned to speak with him. There was a look of much earnestness on the constable's face now as he talked rapidly, and no trace of the smile he had worn. Evidently, this fresh development was anything but pleasing to him. However, he seemed to make little impression on the mind of Count Charles, for after a moment the latter shook his head negatively and again addressed Crépin.

"What you offer is too seductive to be ignored," he said impetuously. "You say that you can deliver over to me the Sieur Giraud and the mad wench?"

"I may not place them in my lord count's hand, bound and fast," answered Crépin quickly; "but I can this very day lead my lord count to the camp of Marcelle, scarce three leagues distant in the hills. It would be strange if my lord should fail to lay hands on them both."

"How many numbers this band?" asked Count Charles, after a pause.

"Three-score and eight when all are in camp; but some are sure to be in the hills."

"By my faith, 'twould be a fitting close to the day!" exclaimed the count, half to himself. "And if Monseigneur did not require my presence at Namur, I would be disposed—but what of that? Three-score and eight—two-score of our own archers should account for these boors with little trouble. Nor is it only question of laying hands on the Sieur Giraud and the woman. To-day have I seen that other with the Sieur Giraud, that Monsieur Vignolles. That can only mean that the Lady Agathe is in their hands as well."

Again the constable spoke earnestly to Count Charles, but this time he was waved aside quickly.

"I am disposed to look on your offer with favour," he said sharply to Crépin. "You shall have your life if you lead my men straight to the camp of Marcelle."

He turned and called to one of his staff, who spurred forward. It was Captain Chaubran.

"Collect two-score of the archers of my guard—they will be returning from their pursuit now—and follow where this man shall lead you. Let him be roped to two of our men that he may try no tricks. You will do best

to wait till dark before falling upon them, but when you do so, remember, I want no prisoners. The Lady Agathe, I have reason to believe, has been taken by this band. It will be your task to release her and escort her to Namur. I except the Sieur Giraud d'Orson and the mad woman from what I said regarding prisoners. Bring them to me dead if need be; but your reward shall be doubled if they be living. I would settle their lot myself. If this man leads you straight, set him free when you come to the camp. Go!"

Chaubran saluted and, wheeling about, rode off to gather his force. Count Charles turned upon the archers who held Crépin.

"Your lives shall answer for that fellow till you turn him over to my guard," he said shortly, then to the others, "And now, my lords, to assemble your men; and so to Namur."

A moment the wood echoed with the jingle of spurs and the clash of armour. Then Crépin found himself alone with his guards, who now prudently set about binding him hand and foot, but Crépin resisted no longer. Had he been a godly man he would have poured forth his thanks to God for such escape. Being what he was, he gloried in his own acumen; cursed weakly as the ropes cut his flesh; then waited with his head sunk upon his breast. After all, the Fates had been kind.

On the Great Bald Knoll two-score and two other heads nodded as though in sympathy. It is doubtful if Crépin had now a thought for those senseless shapes.

CHAPTER XIV

THE STAMP OF MORET THE ARMOURER

WHETHER the Sieur Giraud and Monsieur Vignolles would have set forth hot-foot for Dinant on learning of the Lady Agathe's departure thither is of small moment, since they were given no option in the matter. The probability is that they would have done so with never a second thought, for both now held this band of Companions in greater abhorrence than ever, and Monsieur Vignolles, now that he had become aware of all the Sieur Giraud had suffered, would have followed him blindly.

However, even as the Sieur Giraud spoke so decidedly, Tite came running through the wood toward them. He stopped short as he caught sight of them, and cried:

"Marcelle! Where is Marcelle?"

Neither made any reply, but he saw that they knew not.

"The devil, if ever she should be here, 'tis now! Those rogues have got whatever they've been waiting for and they're moving up the valley fast. André and a dozen others all bring the same report, and they'll be on us within the half of an hour."

The Sieur Giraud shrugged his shoulders.

"Let them come; it matters little to us," he said coldly. "To say the truth, Tite, we want no more to do with any of your affairs here. While I have been with

you I have paid my way, methinks, in as hard work as any of the rest; but that is over."

Tite looked hard at them.

"And are you of the same mind?" he asked Monsieur Vignolles. "By my faith, if so, you are as shifting as a wench, for not long ago you were bawling for a fight like any bravo."

"Ay, and so I would fight now were there aught to lend inducement," was the answer; "but since the Lady Agathe has gone, consume me if I'll risk my life for the mere pleasure of your company!"

"The Lady Agathe gone!" exclaimed Tite.

"Ay; since Marcelle was good enough to free her she has shaken this cursed spot and chosen a safer one in Dinant, whither we follow her," replied the Sieur Giraud, and, indeed, he did think that the Lady Agathe had gone of her own will.

"Dinant! So 'tis a woman's kirtle that would persuade you hence when you are most needed!" growled the old man. "Oh, I know what you would say—what you have said—you two are not of us; it matters naught to you if we be cut up by these fiends from over the river. I know all that; but, by St. Hubert, ne'er did I think to see either of you run from a fight! But go—go! Let me not keep you; only little of Dinant will you see this night."

"And why?"

They asked it together.

"Because by now those others hold the mouth of the valley yonder," cried Tite. "Try that way and you'll have reason drilled into you with a cloth-yard shaft."

"Bah! then we'll go round them by the ridges, old Whitehead!" said Monsieur Vignolles.

"To find the gates of Dinant shut by the time you

come before them, fool," answered Tite shortly. "And mark you, you can count on one hand, with two fingers to spare, those to whom those gates will be opened after nightfall."

There was truth in what he said; the Sieur Giraud had not been with this band so long without knowing that for himself. Yet in his haste he had not thought of it before. The three stood in silence; but at length the Sieur Giraud spoke quietly.

"Since 'tis forced upon us, we will stay." And then suddenly he drew himself up. "And since we stay we will make something of it. By all the saints, stand mumbling there no longer, old man; but get you gone to assemble the men! Let one of them start the smudge signal to those still in the hills; and do you bring every living being that can bear a bow to the foot of the hill yonder, where we left your precious horses. We'll wait not for their attack, but meet these curs on their way. So move your stiff old legs as ne'er they moved before!"

This was the man that Tite knew, and instead of taking offence at the words, he chuckled softly and made off.

As the others departed toward their quarters, Monsieur Vignolles shot a quizzical look at the Sieur Giraud.

"Spite of the devil, I am not so grieved at the outcome. It's to be bow and shaft, then?" he said.

"Ay; and cut and thrust as well, this time, methinks, for 'twill come to close quarters," answered the Sieur Giraud; and added, "for which the saints be praised, for I, too, am in fit mood for it, monsieur!"

And, in truth, the lust of combat was strong upon him. There is naught that will turn man into such enraged beast, save being tricked as he had been that day.

As they hurried through the wood a great column of black smoke arose from behind the camp. Tite had lost no time in setting the signal. Everywhere men were now flitting through the trees, scattering in all directions to their burrows to augment their supplies of shafts, or bend a fresh string to their bows. Many of them also armed themselves with axes or the hammers which, made for the peaceful hammering of brass, now with lengthened handle became formidable weapons. Here and there one might be seen shouldering a pike, some relic of former strife about the walls of Bouvignes. Altogether, they were a nondescript rabble and scarce likely to dispute the way with any trained force they might encounter, though they would give good enough account of themselves against these other outlaws they went to meet.

The Sieur Giraud and Monsieur Vignolles hastened to Tite's den, took therefrom the saddles and harness, and, running down the hill, quickly had them in place on the horses. That done, they mounted, and riding in a circuit round the hill ascended it from the side farthest from the approaching foe. In a spot completely hedged in with undergrowth and half-way up the slope they secured the beasts to trees. Here, at least, they would be safe from stray shots, and both these men were trained to think of their mounts before themselves. As for Tite, he could not have sat a saddle had his life depended upon doing it, and they gave him no thought. Then they separated, and, hastening to their respective quarters, arrayed themselves for the fray.

When they again met at the base of the hill, both wore coats of mail beneath their tunics and had resumed their swords. These the Sieur Giraud had never been deprived of, but hitherto he had had no occasion for their

use. Long bows and belts full of shafts completed their equipment.

Already they found some two-score of the band assembled, and not one of these was there who looked not to the Sieur Giraud for direction. Among the motley gathering the two women, Ulrique Cadet and Célie Lespere, with some others, moved about scattering coarse gibes in their wakes, but heartening the men by their very dare-devil manner. Each bore a bow with a practised hand, and the shafts beneath their arms seemed scarcely out of place. They were more men than women. Marcelle appeared not among them.

The Sieur Giraud quickly made his arrangements. A half-score under André he sent hurrying down the valley to meet the enemy. Tite, with a score more, he threw along the sides of the ravine to catch them in flank when André and his men should be forced back; and the main body he posted behind trees in the line the enemy must take in approaching the camp. That done, he sat down and waited, conversing in low tones with Monsieur Vignolles.

As they so sat, there was a sharp rustle in the brush behind them, and they spun round to see Marcelle standing there, her face and dress smeared with dirt and her hair tumbling in confusion about her ears. Neither had heard her approach, and she seemed to have dropped upon them from the branches above.

"I—I was in the wood—far away—and knew naught of this till I saw the smoke," she gasped. "They are close upon us; I saw some of them as I came along the ridge yonder."

She pointed upward with her bow, and both men noted that, despite her excitement, her hand was steady enough.

"Then you will hear from André ere long," said the Sieur Giraud drily.

"The Lady Agathe—has—has gone to Dinant. She will be safe whatever happens," stammered Marcelle, looking down the valley.

"I know; I am glad," he answered, and then coldly and without a glance in her direction, "It may hearten the men if you show yourself among them."

He pointed toward the figures half-hidden among the trees, and it was too plain a dismissal to be passed over. It had come to this, then: that she, the leader of this band, not only should not lead it, but even in the face of the enemy should suffer such affront. Others had tried such tactics to their cost, and was this man then to dictate to her with impunity? No—she would—yes, she would; but not this time.

With the meekness of a saint, yet with the hot blood high in her cheeks, she turned and walked toward the others.

Monsieur Vignolles's gaze had never left her face, and now he pursed his lips in wonderment. In that brief moment his eyes had been opened largely; but he was ageing rapidly, and with age was growing the impression that the affairs of Monsieur Vignolles were all that he could swing comfortably. Moreover, the next moment there were other things to claim his attention, for even as he caught the subdued hum of welcome with which the band greeted Marcelle, a spent arrow flicked through the trees and fell between him and the Sieur Giraud.

Both hastened to take cover, and in a moment more André and his men came falling back doggedly on the main force—not all of them who had set forth down the valley, in truth, for three of their number had met winged death yonder.

But even as the shafts fell thicker and thicker about them, there came a sudden pause in the swift advance of the foe. Tite had waited until they were well between his two forces, and now, from both sides of the ravine at only forty paces range, let fly such a cloud of arrows as wellnigh to throw them into a panic. Till that moment the fight had gone on in a strange, weird silence, neither side having any mind to expose its position; but now sharp cries and groans came from the wood as some well-directed shaft found its mark. So near was the enemy now that their shadowy figures could be seen as they dodged from tree to tree in their efforts to find shelter against this new attack upon their flanks.

"Ha! For a man of trade, old Whitehead has much to commend him!" said Monsieur Vignolles. "They'll not stand the tune he is playing them for long."

The Sieur Giraud did not answer. His great yew bow was bent till his right hand grazed his ear, and the next moment the string slapped smartly against his buckskin arm-guard. Three-score paces distant a prowling figure leaped with a wild cry into the air and came heavily to earth, a shaft well through his middle.

"By my faith, an Englishman himself could have done no better," said Monsieur Vignolles drily, and peered forth from behind his tree for similar opportunity.

"You spoke naught but the truth in saying they would not stand Tite's offering long!" exclaimed the other, fitting a fresh horned notch to his string. "They are breaking now. Oh, for a little more light, and few of these curs would ever leave this ravine!"

He sprang into the open, heedless of the random shafts that flew about him.

"And now, you knaves, out from your cover and at them!" he roared, and, followed by Monsieur Vignolles,

rushed forward, pausing to shoot whenever a fair mark showed itself.

The band was quick to take up the cry and followed close upon his heels.

And now a veritable pandemonium raged in the woods where these outlaws fought. The hoarse, mad curses of pursuer and pursued; the exulting cries of savagery as some well-sped arrow laid an adversary low; the gasping moans of the stricken; all punctuated jerkily with the sharp twang of bow-string or the heavy thud of point against tree, served for the time to render the gulch a veritable hell. Yet, with it all, the actual loss of life was small as compared to the number engaged, for these vagabonds were far from being skilled bowmen, and, in the turmoil, the random shaft found its victim nearly as often as the aimed one.

One arrow point did the Sieur Giraud receive full on the chest, but it barely penetrated his mail. Monsieur Vignolles, less fortunate, was struck a grazing blow on the head, the shaft speeding on with his cap and leaving behind it a jagged wound from which the blood poured freely over his face. But the enemy had had more than enough, and waited not to come to close quarters with their assailants. A round dozen of their men were on the ground, and of those afoot, many had been hit. With one accord they fled down the gulch, and the air was full of arrows behind them, and close after followed the Sieur Giraud and his shouting company. For this time he meant to deal them such blow as they should never recover from, and the fever of killing was full upon him.

As he plunged forward he became conscious of a small figure running beside him. It was Marcelle—Marcelle as he had first seen her, pitiless, untamed, and with the fierce joy of combat in her eyes. Tite, too, now

fell in with them, moving swiftly despite his years, and with him came Poncet and Moïse, who, returning from Dinant, had found the fight in full fling.

And then ahead of them they saw a wild confusion among those they hunted; and an instant later, with mad shouting these had broken the line of their flight and fled up the sides of the gorge. Darkness was now almost full upon the wood, and they melted into the heavy shadows like so many phantom shapes.

Ere the Sieur Giraud and the others had time to fathom this sudden move, there rose up before them, as from the ground, a blurred mass. A moment later a volley of shafts seemed fairly to rend them asunder. The Sieur Giraud felt a sharp sting in the shoulder and the warm blood trickling down beneath his armpit; Moïse flung up his hands and sunk with a great sigh, first to his knees and then prone upon his face; and all about groans and oaths told of others struck.

"Ambushed, by all the saints, and well have they led us into the trap!" cried Monsieur Vignolles, and slipped behind a tree.

"Ay; and they have chosen their time well," replied the Sieur Giraud bitterly. "Scarce two shafts apiece have we left."

And, in truth, they had not been sparing of missiles, deeming them of small use if they came to close quarters.

"So be it!" replied Monsieur Vignolles. "What we have we will send where they will be appreciated." And with that he let fly in the direction of the approaching company.

But they came on steadily, seeming to care little for the ill-directed shafts sent at them, and, in truth, now it was too dark for the most expert bowman to hold with certainty. Their first volley had been so terribly effective

only because it had been discharged into the rushing mass of men whom they met.

"We must fall back toward the camp," said the Sieur Giraud in a moment, for now it was his own followers who were threatened with panic. Nearly a score of their number laid low at one volley had shaken them.

As he spoke he felt a touch on the arm and turned to find Marcelle standing beside him.

"Look!" she cried, holding an arrow forth for his inspection. "Ne'er was such shaft made in the Forest of Ardennes."

He took it from her quickly and passed it through his fingers from goose-feathered butt to brazed and steeled head. Then he gave a sharp cry and, thoughtless of the danger of exposing himself, leaned forward from the tree's shadow and strained his gaze upon the bit of metal. Yes; there it was, the mark that his fingers had felt—two crossed arrows within a shield and the letter M beneath. Even in the gathering gloom he could make it out clearly enough.

"It glanced against me from yonder tree, else would I have noted it not," said Marcelle. "Know you then whom these be who now meet us?"

"Ay, and think not we have to deal longer with any vagabond band," answered the Sieur Giraud, while Monsieur Vignolles leaped to his side at the words. "The stamp on this arrow-head is that of old Moret, armourer to the Count de Charolais's archers of the guard. By my faith, methought such discharge wondrous for these rogues!"

He turned quickly and passed the word for falling back upon the camp.

"The archers of the guard! May the saints preserve me, for I bent bow against them!" muttered Mon-

sieur Vignolles, as they silently picked their way from cover to cover. "Yet they will hang us higher than any of these thieves if they lay hands on us. What go you to do, Sieur Giraud?"

"Get to the horses and make off if we may," was the answer. "If not—we shall know how to die, Monsieur Vignolles."

The archers, proceeding cautiously at first, now finding no foe before them, quickened their pace and forced the Companions to do likewise. Occasionally they sent an arrow whirring through the darkness after them; but for the most part they had given over the use of the bow, and depended now on the two-handed swords they wore when they should come up with their quarry.

Marcelle hung closely between the Sieur Giraud and Monsieur Vignolles as they ran.

"Poncet and another have gone ahead to fetch more arrows," she cried breathlessly. "We shall beat them off once we come to the hill."

"Speak for yourself and the others," answered the Sieur Giraud coldly.

"But you—you will help—you must help now; you and Monsieur Vignolles."

"Neither he nor I will draw bow or sword against the Count de Charolais," he answered, and wondered why it was the light seemed now to be growing stronger and why he could catch her expression of amazement.

"And what, then, intend you?" she asked.

"To get as far as may be from this devil's abode, and spend the rest of our days in cursing the hour that e'er saw us come here!" put in Monsieur Vignolles. "As for myself, I am of one mind with the Sieur Giraud. We will not fight against the Count de Charolais."

"They will hang you," she gasped.

"They have not caught us as yet, and if they do——"

"Fire!"

The word burst from the Sieur Giraud, and he stretched his hand upward toward the hill, conscious at the same time of a stiffening of his shoulder where he had been hit.

Sure enough; far on the summit was a blaze rapidly swelling in volume. Some sparks from the smudge-signal Tite had set had been wafted into the undergrowth, and this, dryer than any tinder from the summer's sun, had sprung alight instantly. Now that whole part of the forest was a roaring mass of flame, and its angry crackle carried even to their ears. This, then, explained the growing light the Sieur Giraud had noticed.

A great cheer broke from those behind them. Here was the very light that would render archery of some avail. As the light flared more and more strongly, casting great black and distorted shadows through the trees, again the rain of shafts came hurtling among the Companions. Ever and anon one fell to rise no more, but the rest pressed on, a disorganised, terror-stricken rabble with never a thought for the fallen.

At last they came to the base of the hill, and here Poncet awaited them with a great bundle of arrows. Yet they would have torn past him in their flight had not Marcelle sprang upon a rock and madly called upon them to stand. She stood in full light and a dozen arrows sung round her, yet she passed unscathed, and her very example served to hearten them. With loud curses they fell upon the shafts and took up their old places behind the trees. But they had lost too many; the real fighting spirit was gone from the band and they drew bow in faint-hearted fashion, and ever with an eye to the rear.

Though but one thing was uppermost in the mind of the Sieur Giraud—the fear that the horses would be stampeded by the fire—he found himself held a moment by the gruesome picture. And of a sudden, as he tarried there, the forest rang with the wild swinging chorus of the archers:

Then ho, for the Forest of Ardennes!
And a curse on the knaves that are free!
The bow-strings are twanging and soon they'll be hanging
To rot on the uppermost tree.
Ha! Ha! On the uppermost tree.

As they roared forth the last line they rushed from their cover, casting aside their bows and drawing their two-handed swords, their blades flashing fire in the red glare. Two of them pitched forward, one by Tite's hand, and had the rest of the Companions held as firmly, the archers, despite their contempt for their adversaries, must have paid heavily for their temerity. But the menace of death was before them in that gleaming steel and they turned and fled up the hill with the archers in full cry after them. And God help those who stumbled or were overtaken, for the licking blades knew no pity!

The Sieur Giraud and Monsieur Vignolles had pressed forward a little into the wood and the seething torrent swept past, leaving them apparently unnoticed.

Marcelle had disappeared, borne away somewhere on the flood.

"Come, monsieur; now for the horses!" exclaimed the Sieur Giraud, and with that the two set forth up the gorge away from the shouting, maddened horde.

And now they ran, with all the speed they might summon, obliquely up the hill toward where they had left

the beasts. But as they panted onward their hearts grew heavy with the doubt that is almost certainty, for the crackling of the burning wood seemed very near and the air was full of pitchy smoke that came ever thicker and more chokingly.

Their fears were not ungrounded, for, even as they came breathless upon the spot, a great, trampled gap in the hedge of brush told where the terrified brutes had passed through. Within the circle, from one tree, hung the parted end of a rein, and from another the entire bridle which one of the beasts had torn entire from his head.

Ere either might speak the brush parted suddenly and Marcelle came upon them. Tears streamed from her eyes, and she threw herself prostrate before them, sobbing aloud.

"Oh, God forbid that e'er again I should see such sights!" she cried. "Those with whom I have lived, talked, ay, jested, to see them butchered like so many fowls for the table! And Ulrique Cadet—a woman—not even her would they spare— Ah!"

She shuddered and seemed trying to repel something from before her eyes.

"You knew the horses were here?" cried the Sieur Giraud. "You came to——"

"Ay, I knew they were here and that it could only have been you who had such forethought," she broke in. "I saw them as I entered to join you below, before the fight commenced."

"Entered? Entered what?" asked Monsieur Vignolles; but before she might answer a heavy step came crashing through the thicket, and a burly form burst hurriedly into their midst.

It was none other than Captain Chaubran.

"In the name of Monseigneur the Duke of Burgundy, I call upon you to yield, Sieur Giraud d'Orson, and you, Monsieur Vignolles!" he cried, and raised his sword to give emphasis to his words.

Marcelle sprang to her feet, and he started, for he had not noticed her before.

"Yield not to this man!" she muttered to the Sieur Giraud. "I can save you; I swear it!"

"And the mad wench of the Ardennes!" cried Chaubran. "By my faith, my bag fattens. The devil's chase did you two lead me up the hill; but methought to recognise you, and now I am more than repaid."

He gave a loud halloo as he ended, and it was answered by many voices from the direction of the camp.

"Would you stand there to be taken thus?" cried Marcelle in a low tone. "I tell you I will save you, even as you once did me!"

But neither of these men had any view to being so seized. They would not bear arms against the Count de Charolais, it was true; but this affair with Captain Chaubran came too near being a personal matter to give them any scruples. By their capture and certain death would he gain advancement and reward. Yet the answering cries had warned them that there was no time for sword-play and its uncertainties.

The Sieur Giraud unslung his sword-belt, and, striding to Chaubran, dropped the weapon at his feet.

"I have seen too well to-day what you can do, captain," he said quietly.

Marcelle moaned and Monsieur Vignolles cursed aloud, but Chaubran smiled patronisingly.

"I am glad to see that the hills have not robbed you of common-sense, Sieur Giraud," he said. "Such task as this is no pleasant one for me, I assure you, for once

a comrade, always a comrade, say I. But we may not choose our own work."

He lowered his point and half bowed.

"Monsieur Vignolles will see the same advantage in yielding, I make no——"

The hands of the Sieur Giraud closed about his throat with the grip of a vice, and the rest of his speech became a gurgling sigh. A few moments he struggled; then, with a last twitch of the limbs, lay quite still. Seizing him by feet and head, the two men threw him heavily into the brush, wherein he sunk from view.

The shouting of those who came in answer to Chaubran's halloo was now very near. Marcelle plucked the two by their sleeves.

"Come!" she said, and they followed her quickly, the Sieur Giraud only pausing to recover his sword.

At the far side of the little compound where the horses had been left she parted the undergrowth very gently, and, on her lowering her foot, they heard the soft splash of water.

"A stream!" exclaimed Monsieur Vignolles.

"No; a spring," she replied. "Follow me," and with that she disappeared from view, and the brush closed over where she had stood.

They made haste to comply, both going over ankle in the cold water of the spring, and then, on feeling for their next footing, they understood where they were, for the way descended precipitously. They were feeling their way along a great gash that nature had at one time or another torn in the hillside. Under their feet trickled the water from the fountain-head above, and a rank underbrush, sure of a never-ending supply of drink, had sprung up along this tiny stream. As they crawled along in the wake of Marcelle they were as completely

shut in as though the hand of man had built their roof. From without, this narrow cleft would pass unnoticed, being blocked with such a matted tangle of growth.

They had been none too soon, for ere they had travelled thirty paces the shouts of the archers came to them from above. They would find Chaubran, and if he was not dead—and the Sieur Giraud knew not—they would set to scouring the wood for them. Unless one of their number should fall into the spring, it was scarce likely they would look in the right direction.

The way was stony and productive of much cutting of the hands, and they were forced to descend slowly and fairly clear each step before them. But at length Marcelle stopped and signalled them to be quiet; then, after listening a moment, worked her way through the brush ahead, and stepped forth into the open. They followed immediately, and found themselves at the precise spot where Marcelle had appeared to them before the fray began. Now they both recalled the soiled state of her face and attire, and her sudden appearance as from the branches above.

"'Tis a way I found myself," whispered Marcelle, her face glowing in the flaring light of the fire above. "None other of the band knows of it; and now come; we must away down the valley while they are—are occupied above."

She shuddered again as she said this last.

"Down the valley?" said the Sieur Giraud.

"Ay, for we go to Dinant. 'Tis our only refuge now," she answered.

"But the gates will be closed," said Monsieur Vignolles.

"They will open to me," was the reply; and without further word she led the two men through the

forest, now lurid with the glow from the great furnace above.

They followed her as they would have followed one they trusted implicitly; yet both believed that she would hesitate—indeed, had hesitated—at naught to gain her ends, even to the shedding of blood. Why they now put faith in her neither could have told.

So, at last, they came before the great gates of Dinant, and here rose up to greet them Tite, who wept copious tears into his beard at sight of Marcelle, and Poncet Meux, who neither wept nor laughed, but rocked himself in moody silence upon the ground.

Then Marcelle went to the barrier, and, after some moments, the guard came in answer to her call. In turn, he called the officer in charge, who delayed only to assure himself that it was indeed Marcelle who asked admittance. A moment later, with much creaking, the great bridge descended and the gates ponderously swung open before them.

In truth, these people of Dinant held Marcelle in high regard. So thought Monsieur Vignolles as they entered—this surviving band of five—and the gates again closed behind them.

"Heaven bless the child!" muttered Tite, and his eyes shone moist in the light of the guard lantern.

As for the Sieur Giraud, he was thinking how close it all had been, and his hand shook ever so slightly, for its fingers still seemed to feel the stamp of Moret the Armourer.

CHAPTER XV

IN THE MARKET-PLACE

FIVE-SCORE men, thrown out of prosperous employment and subjected to all the discontent that idleness breeds, may become a dangerous factor in any peaceful community. Increase their number to a thousand, and the resulting disorder will be made greater by much more than the tenfold expansion the mere figures indicate. Multiply this thousand by a half-score, do away with all attempt at law and order, and raise the price of a crust to that formerly asked for a loaf, and there will have been created a veritable Hades on earth.

Also, there will be had a fair appreciation of conditions within the town of Dinant, for in her rambling streets wellnigh a half-score thousand wretches idled, caroused, quarrelled, and fought as the mood seized them or opportunity offered. These had preferred remaining in the town to joining the roving bands of Liègeoise in the hills; but from them, as well as from the Companions of the Green Tent, had all sense of right and wrong long since departed. Thieving, beggary, and murder had replaced all thrift, and any man's life could be had for the mere pittance which might serve to ward off starvation.

Yet scarce a year before the towering limestone cliff yonder had looked down upon a vastly different scene in the town nestling at its base. Great forge-fires then

had shot columns of heavy smoke aloft, and by night had emitted a red glow which, reflected in the sky, was visible many leagues distant. The clamour of thousands of hammers upon brass had rung loudly in an air teeming with the very essence of industry, and the streets had thronged with those intent only on their callings.

Nor was it strange that the people of Dinant should have felt a species of pride in the great industry they had built up. Did a church lack baptismal font, or require intricately wrought organ-screen, was it not to the copper-artisans of Dinant that it turned when other workers had admitted their inability to cope with such designs? If their brass-founders were known chiefly for their output of mere kitchen utensils, nevertheless such fame was widespread, and the worth of this *Dinanderie*, as it was known, was acknowledged, not only in Europe, but in England, across the sea. Moreover, because of her thrift, Dinant had been admitted to the privileges of the great Hanseatic League, and so had no need to fear for her markets. Therefore the people had a great commercial pride, and, in truth, this is one of the most promising forms pride may assume.

Such had been one of the towns the Bishop of Liège had seen fit to ruin, and now the better element in the town was throttled by the ruthless hands of the outlaws he had created, and scarce dared speak their views above a whisper. Marcelle's ready admission within the walls was a proof of this, for, indeed, among the roisterers who held the town, her name was held in high favour. That a semblance of order was preserved in the guard at the gates was due merely to a sense of self-interest.

As the guard finally left them and entered his small box-like quarters, Marcelle turned to the others.

"Go to the house of Madame Vaucler," she said. "Tite, you know the way thither. Tell her of what we have passed through, and—and tell her that—that André will come home no more."

"I know; did I not see him go down on the very crest of the hill when, in another moment, he would have been safe away?" answered Tite soberly.

Marcelle drew a purse from her bosom and took therefrom some pieces of gold, which she handed Tite.

"Say that none of us might do aught to help André," she said, "and give this gold to Madame Vaucler. For it she will house you while you are here, for God knows the poor soul can have little enough to keep the very life within her. Ay, it is indeed your gold—or, rather, the constable's—I spend so freely, Monsieur Vignolles," she added, and held up the purse so that he recognised it as the one he had given up.

"Faith, I had forgotten that e'er I possessed such sum," said Monsieur Vignolles drily. "You will retain it, I make no doubt."

"You are wise, Monsieur Vignolles; I shall retain it; but only for a short time," she answered, and thrust the purse again from view. "I have other debts—debts that gold may do as little toward paying—to meet here in Dinant. Madame Vaucler is but one."

She was thinking of those others to whom she came as a messenger of torturing grief.

Monsieur Vignolles bowed.

"Even were the sum mine own and not my lord's," he said, "you should have it willingly for the service you have this night done me."

"I thank you," she answered simply, and added, "At all events I must away and not rest idling here. Have a care how you speak of who and what you are,

and put aside the mail I see you both wear beneath your tunics. Tite and Poncet here you may trust; but some others of the band, if they ever reach the town, might have less scruple about exposing you."

She turned on her heel and would have made off, but the Sieur Giraud suddenly roused himself and caught her by the sleeve ere she had made two paces.

"And you, Marcelle; whither go you?" he asked.

"I have said that I had my errands—errands I would to God fell not upon me!" she answered, and her great eyes met his, so that he saw the tears well into them.

A moment he was silent, and looked at her earnestly; then he spoke, but seemed not to be addressing her, but some other listener. Yet withal his voice was so low that she barely caught the words.

"Which—which is the true Marcelle—the mad fury of this morning or she whom I see to-night?"

"There—there is but one Marcelle," she answered, and felt herself trembling at his touch upon her arm.

He shook his head.

"Tell me not so, for ever before my eyes glide the two figures—the one hateful, the other gentle and good and full of compassion. Which is the true Marcelle?"

She turned her head from him for an instant, then as quickly faced him with the look of a stag at bay.

"In pity's name, torture me not in this fashion!" she cried. "I—I know not what I am, nor whither I am going, nor does it matter. Something—something is fighting within me and tearing me to pieces—here—here, do you understand? Ah, let me go; I—I must be alone!"

She clutched her breast, as though she so would

still the raging there, and her words came with such passionate force that he released his hold of her sleeve.

Ere she might move, Monsieur Vignolles hastily came to them.

"The Lady Agathe is in Dinant," he said quickly. "Know you where she is housed, Marcelle?"

Both of his hearers started; Marcelle, because she had hoped to avoid such inquiry in the excitement of the hour; the Sieur Giraud, because it suddenly struck him as strange that the first thought of the Lady Agathe should come from Monsieur Vignolles. This was little short of recreant on his part, and he hastened to make amends.

"Ay, Marcelle, if you know, inform us where she may be found," he said eagerly. "Perchance we may now be of small service to her; yet it may please her, in this strange place, to learn that we are here, should she require us."

"The Lady Agathe is here, and safe-housed enough; yet you may not venture where she is lodged," answered Marcelle, after a pause. "There she is known for the lady she is; but, vagabonds though we are, we make war not upon women, as does the Count de Charolais. But were you to be seen asking after her, 'twould be short shrift with you."

"How know you so much of all this?" exclaimed the Sieur Giraud. "Was it you, then, who sent the Lady Agathe hither—you who provided for her safety and arranged for her reception?"

"Yes," answered Marcelle; and then, because she was irritated by his half-approving tone, "So would I have sent the other women, had *they* not been of some service to us. The Lady Agathe could do naught save be a hindrance; therefore, I sent her to Dinant."

She was wondering, as she spoke, what they would say did they suspect her real reason in so disposing of the Lady Agathe.

"And when may we see my lady?" asked Monsieur Vignolles.

Marcelle looked at him sharply. Again she seemed to see more than a mere chivalrous interest in this man's concern for the Lady Agathe. Some day the truth regarding the Sieur Giraud would come to my lady's ears; even Marcelle could not hope to prevent that for ever. Then Monsieur Vignolles, if he did cherish any affection for her, soon would learn how hopeless was his suit.

Marcelle smiled bitterly at this thought as she answered:

"I know not. On the morrow I will make some arrangement, if I may. Petite Maman shall bring you word."

"Petite Maman is with my lady?" said the Sieur Giraud.

"Yes, to attend to such wants as may arise; she and Bonne Fleuron as well. And now, *adieu;* I have work before me."

With a wave of the hand to Tite and Poncet, she set out up the street and disappeared around the first turning.

Poncet Meux had caught that part of the talk concerning the whereabouts of the Lady Agathe, and had he so been disposed could have answered those inquiries himself. In fact, now that Moïse lay dead yonder in the valley, he alone—save for the two women—held the secret with Marcelle. But Poncet had a long memory, and he still brooded over a blow the Sieur Giraud once had struck him for naught save a little pleasantry on his

part. No; these two could find out for themselves, since it was so important.

Tite led the way rapidly through the back streets; yet even here many people were afoot, watching the glare of the forest fire. At last he entered a gateway on whose posts hung no gate, and, the others following, crossed a dishevelled patch of ground and brought up before the door of Madame Vaucler's abode. It flew open ere Tite could knock, and the old woman appeared to confront them, having heard their approaching steps.

It is needless to recount the scene that ensued, and will suffice to say that after a heart-rending interval, during which the woman's suffering caused them all to turn away, she threw open to them such hospitality as her humble abode afforded. This consisted of but one room, that of the ill-fated André; but anything in the shape of a lodging was only too welcome.

In the first instance, Tite, whose utility knew no bounds, set himself to dress the wounds of the Sieur Giraud and Monsieur Vignolles. The former, thanks to his protective coat of mail, was but lightly touched, though he had bled copiously. The latter's wound was an uglier matter, and over it Tite spent considerable time, finally binding it up in cloths soaked in some herb infusion the woman brought him.

Monsieur Vignolles's eyes were of unnatural brilliancy, and his face of chalky whiteness, for, in truth, he had lost more blood than the other, yet his flow of spirits was not sapped.

"By all the saints! if my Lord the Constable should set eyes on me now, methinks he'd find much joy in the sight!" he said, and passed his hand over his bandages. "We shall take rank as the first brawlers of the town on the morrow."

"Which should be good passports," answered the Sieur Giraud with a laugh, as both men shed their steel casings and flung them with their swords into the corner nearest the bed.

Madame Vaucler had departed into the streets, but soon returned with a baked fowl, the half of a loaf of bread, and two flagons of wine, which the magic gold Tite had given her had brought forth even in this hungry town. Small fare it was for these wearied men; but they divided it in silence and made quick end of it. That done, they threw themselves on the coarse blankets which madame spread upon the floor—all save Monsieur Vignolles, whom Tite swore must have the one small bed—and almost before the door had been closed upon them their heavy breathing filled the room.

Such slumber as that of these four worn and jaded men takes no account of the passage of time, and Madame Vaucler, looking in upon them, when the following morning had half spent itself, found them still sleeping as though some potent drug had been mixed with their wine. Had it not been needful, she would not have waked them, for within her was a great understanding of what they had suffered; and, then, had they not been comrades of André—her own André—now for ever gone out of her life? But she was left no choice in the matter.

Picking her way across the little room, she knelt and shook Tite till, after a series of snorts, and what passed for a growl, he sat up and stared at her with some show of intelligence.

"The devil! the sun is well up!" he exclaimed, and his tone seemed to indicate that he took it ill enough that that celestial body so should have anticipated him.

"Ay, and has been up these five hours," replied Madame Vaucler; "but that's neither here nor there. Petite Maman has just been here with a message to you from Marcelle; the saints preserve the dear! She has gone forth into the hills again to learn if any be left of the band."

Tite leaped to his feet, active enough now.

"Into the hills! Alone!" he cried. "Thousand follies! The child may fall in with—yet no; those fiends, having done their work, will have taken themselves off to Namur again. Why did Marcelle not speak of this purpose last night?"

The old man glared at Madame Vaucler as though she alone were answerable for this new move of Marcelle's.

"In any case, 'tis no place for Tite here, while she alone goes to the camp," he added quickly. "Poncet! Poncet! do you bestir your lazy self; we must again to the forest!"

So saying, he kicked that worthy into an upright position. The Sieur Giraud and the other turned uneasily at the noise he made, but still slept on.

"Not so fast, Tite," said the woman in a low voice. "Marcelle also charges you and Poncet to remain here with these other two. Methinks she would have an eye kept upon them. And she bids you, by the love you bear her, to say naught to them of the whereabouts of some woman called Agathe, till her return. 'Tis no right of mine to pry into Marcelle's affairs; but who is this Agathe?"

"You have woman's reason," answered Tite; "but since 'tis none of your affair, look not for answer to the question you ask in the same breath. So I'm to stay here to nurse these two great hulking babes. Well, per-

chance, Marcelle is right, and they'll bear the watching," he went on to Poncet, "though, by my faith, I believe the time past when they would try any tricks. However, 'tis clear that Marcelle means to keep the fine lady close enough, and 'tis not for us to seek for the reason."

Thus it was that some moments later the other two, on awakening, found this fresh predicament facing them, and realised that the Lady Agathe was as far from them as though they were still in the hills. Had they believed that either Tite or Poncet knew what they so ardently sought to learn, it is probable they might have forced the information from the latter; but, alas! they thought the secret alone held by Marcelle. Yet there was a ray of hope, for she had said that the women Petite Maman and Bonne Fleuron were with the Lady Agathe. While they were sure that the latter would not venture into the turbulent streets, it was more than probable that one of the others might do so, and once seen, there would remain but to follow her home to discover the Lady Agathe's lodging.

Their long rest had restored them greatly, and though Monsieur Vignolles's head still ached consumedly, he would not hear of being left behind when the Sieur Giraud, after their meagre repast, rose and threw on his sword. Willingly would they have shaken Tite, but he showed not the least intention of leaving them, and so the three together fared forth into the streets.

Poncet made off by himself. His father, the vine-grower, had come into the town that morning, bringing his spouse and such of his household treasures as might find place upon their backs. It was growing too warm for the old couple in the vicinity of the Great Bald Knoll. They preferred Dinant with all its turmoil; and Poncet, hearing of their arrival from Madame Vaucler, whose

range of gossip was extensive, went to find them where they lodged.

Tite's companionship, though irksome, had its advantages. The others soon recognised this as they made their way through the crowded streets, for the man seemed on speaking terms with quite half the people they met. Hence, though they were strangers, they were not subjected to any suspicious questioning, since the fact that they were with so ardent an outlaw as Tite was sufficient passport. Moreover, this day things of greater moment absorbed the unruly throng.

Over the distant hills still hung a dense pall of black smoke; but the fire had swept onward through the Ardennes wood, away from Dinant, to die out, no man might say where and when. But for this as well the mob now had no heed.

The magistrates—mad, in truth, they must have been—terrified by the threats the Count de Charolais had hurled at their heads, had made a last despairing effort to avert the town's impending doom. They had that morning caused to be seized the ringleaders of the rabble which had cast the bastard effigy of Count Charles over the walls of Bouvignes; all, save the man Gaspard Lenoir, whom they could not lay hands on. At the hour of eleven these prisoners were to be taken before the magistrates in the town-hall.

This Tite communicated to his two companions as they neared the market-place, through which the captives must pass and whither the crowd was tending in one great, heaving swell. The very fact that a last weak attempt at law and order was being made, that the magistrates so would cringe before the hated foe of Burgundy, served to enrage the frenzied populace. The roaring from thousands of throats made of the

market-place a perfect bedlam; but this, as the hands of the town-hall clock neared the hour of eleven, became lessened to a murmur and then died away to silence—an ominous silence it was, coming from such a gathering.

And now the Sieur Giraud and the others could catch the whispered utterances that passed sullenly from one to another. For the most part, the temper of the rabble was for seizing the prisoners; but there were many who hesitated not to heap curses upon them, as the great cause of the fate that menaced the town. One, in truth, went so far as to bemoan the fact that Gaspard Lenoir himself had not been taken. Yet but a fortnight before they had hailed this achievement of the effigy and its inventor with joyous approval; but then they were in the minority, and, in any case, one looks not for reason in a mob. Decidedly, though, there was an element in this gathering that the man Lenoir would do well to avoid.

The first stroke of the great bell calling the hour fell suddenly upon the air. Instantly the crowd surged forward, and, at the same moment, the gates of the little prison opposite the town-hall opened.

A score of town-guards—the last on whom the magistrates might depend—issued forth, and, thrusting the people back with their pikes, formed about the half-dozen wretches who followed them. As they set forth across the square a low, ugly murmur again arose, yet the gathering seemed to lack either the stimulus or the leader for the move they intended.

For the former, they had not long to wait, for, even as the procession came to the very centre of the square, one of the prisoners—a tall, long-haired individual, threw his hands aloft with a shrill cry:

"Franchises! Franchises pour Dinant! Au secours! Au secours!"

("Freedom! Civil freedom for Dinant! Help! Help!")

The cry acted on the mob like a goad. With a hoarse bellowing it swarmed over the market-place; the pikemen were tossed aside as so much chaff, or beaten to the ground, and the prisoners shouldered on high and borne about the square in a thunder of shouting.

The magistrates, looking down upon the scene from the windows of the town-hall, shook their heads solemnly and, with all haste, fled by the back way.

In the whirling press of bodies Monsieur Vignolles found himself swept away from his companions and thrown out upon the surging border of the multitude. A half-drunken rioter lurched against him and trod heavily upon his toes, and was rewarded with a blow that wellnigh upset him. With a curse, he gathered himself and savagely made at Monsieur Vignolles; but the latter stayed not to argue, and fled incontinently through the crowd.

For his eye had been caught by something familiar in the figure of a woman who was making her way from the square. A moment later she had turned her head and he had recognised Petite Maman. Then, making his way with all speed after her, he had been swallowed up in the seething horde about him.

His would-be assailant scowled after him.

"And such—hic!—such milksops as that may—hic! —may wear swords!" he said, and sneered with the air of a conqueror.

CHAPTER XVI

A MESSAGE FROM GASPARD LENOIR

FOR some time, in their struggles to keep their own footing in the heaving tumult about them, neither the Sieur Giraud nor Tite noticed the disappearance of their companion. When they did so, it is an open question which was the more perturbed. To Tite, it meant that he had allowed one of his charges to slip his observation; to the Sieur Giraud, it brought the fear that, in his weak state, the press had proved too great for Monsieur Vignolles, and he had been trampled under foot.

The square, however, now was rapidly emptying itself into the streets leading to it, for the rabble, having fulfilled its mission of defiance, was now noisily escorting the rescued to their respective domiciles. In a few moments it was clear that Monsieur Vignolles was not numbered among the fallen. Three or four of the pikemen, an equal number of their assailants, and a dozen or more women and children were among those who, after this outbreak, rose or were borne away by friends; but there was no sign of him for whom the Sieur Giraud searched with such eager dread.

"Small fear need you have of that," Tite said in answer to the Sieur Giraud's expressed concern. "Faith, the man was not the same this morning that he was last night! If he found the press too much for him, he'd get out of it, as indeed he has. We'll find him at Madame Vaucler's, I'll be sworn."

"I make no doubt you are right, Tite," answered the other; "and since 'tis so, let us return there ourselves, for perchance the old woman has managed some food by now, and after such wretched fare as this morning's——"

"Ay, you could eat again and so could I," cut in Tite; "but think not 'tis Madame Vaucler you may look to for easing the cravings of your belly. Such day as this, you may be sure she has thought but for André yonder; nor would she have provided such fare as she did, save that I forced it upon her mind. Yet, despair not. Fool would I have been to have handed her all the gold Marcelle gave me, for I foresaw this very case. Come with me. 'Tis not a long walk to a place I know where we may quiet this gnawing."

He held his fist under the other's eyes and, opening it quickly, displayed a couple of gold crowns.

"Enough to feed three-score of ordinary," he chuckled. "Methinks we shall have something left of it, even at famine prices; but come, for the talk of it fairly tickles my inwards."

With that, he rapidly led the Sieur Giraud up one of the streets and, after sundry turnings, stopped before a certain door. By reason of a sign swinging over it, whereon a huntsman was portrayed in the act of spearing a melancholy and faded wild boar, and by reason of the loud talk coming through the door, the Sieur Giraud knew the place for an inn. Otherwise it was—outwardly at least—in all respects like the neighbouring houses, and evidently had been transformed but recently. With all the assurance of a man of wealth, Tite shoved open the door and entered, followed by the other. From a narrow hallway they turned directly into the one great room the house now boasted below stairs.

Here were gathered about a score men and women drinking over the little tables scattered about the floor —for thus, the price of drink will be found, even when the crust so much more needed is reckoned unattainable. The landlord, a soft-spoken, quiet man, moved smilingly about attending to the wants of his patrons. His trade still thrived, despite the general misery of the town, and he could afford to spare a pleasing word here and there.

As Tite and the Sieur Giraud made their way to a table in one corner, some of the gathering looked up to growl a rough greeting to the former. But, for the most part, they were taken up with the discussion of the events of the morning.

The Sieur Giraud, on entering, had feared that his sword might lead to some questioning; but he quickly saw that such concern was needless, since three or four others sported the same weapon, and a miscellaneous pile of pikes, war-hammers, and morning-stars occupied one corner. In truth, these people were preparing betimes for the fray before them.

Tite summoned the landlord and, first showing a gold piece as warrant for the order, bade him prepare a capon with its attendant dishes, and serve it with two flagons of his best wine in a separate room. For, in truth, Tite had some scruple about making such a meal in this half-starved company. While this was preparing, he ordered that a small flagon be brought to give them appetite. The talk about them ran fast and furious.

"Ay, and what we did for the pikemen yonder, we'll do for this cursed Charlotel and his army!" cried one great bearded ruffian, getting his voice above the others. "You know what you may look for if ever he gets within these walls; yet there be those that counsel submission to the Burgundians."

"Yet not so many by three, since yester morn!" screamed a woman with a harsh laugh. "Ha! Methinks you'll have no such counsel from those tongues yonder on the walls with a pike-end pinning them fast."

This allusion to the fate of three moderate citizens who had been beheaded as holding treasonable views brought forth a storm of approval, and a great clinking of cups and flashing of eyes in her direction. She had omitted to state that for refusing to say a mass in celebration of this deed two holy men had been cast into the river. Indeed, it was a time for men of reason to dissemble.

"I hear the army of Charlotel is nigh ready to move on us," cried a young man angrily.

"He was my 'prentice in the old days," whispered Tite, nudging his companion.

"Let them come!" roared the one who had first spoken. "I tell you King Louis is only waiting till they make the first move, to come to our aid. We have but to stand firm and Charlotel will find himself caught between the two of us. But wait. To-night you will hear all this from Gaspard Lenoir, for he has been north and knows King Louis's plan. Let every one be before the town-hall to-night at the hour of eight."

"And how know you so much where Lenoir keeps himself, since the magistrates might not lay hands on him?" asked one.

"Fool, were I a magistrate, no more would I know!" was the answer; and the speaker tapped his forehead shrewdly. "Does the cock pheasant lie in the open that the first fox may pick him up? No! But that's ended now; the magistrates are the ones in hiding, and the word is passed. Lenoir will speak from the

steps of the town-hall to-night. I have seen him, and have the word from his own lips."

Whatever the man's other qualities, he must have been given to uttering the truth, for none disputed his word. Instead, there arose much shouting and hammering of the tables. It was evident that Lenoir held a place high in their affections.

"Yet, methinks, had not this youth Lenoir steeled the very heart of Count Charles against us, all might have been well."

It was an old man who so spoke, and his gray hairs alone saved him from the wrath of the more violent. However, the Sieur Giraud saw a number exchange meaning glances and nod as though in accord with what he said. Above the loud chorus of calls to throw the old man into the street, the bearded one again made himself heard.

"Old man," he cried, "we like not your sentiment; nor is there any other name than Charlotel that rings true in this town. Were it not that your speech betrays the folly of age, you should have good cause to know this. Perchance yon other gray-head in the corner holds similar views."

He pointed a deriding finger at Tite, who, seeing that he was becoming the focus of all eyes, rose to his feet.

"If you mean me, Jacques Rochet, you know my name well enough," he said quietly.

"Well, Tite," answered the man somewhat disconcerted, "we all know where your heart is. How name you the Burgundian fiend, Count Charles or Charlotel? And speak aloud, that this other may have it from one of his own age."

Tite folded his arms slowly.

"It all depends," he said, and his eyes shone hard upon the man Rochet from under their shaggy brows.

There was a general shuffling of feet and many angry looks were shot at him. He paid them not the slightest heed.

"It all depends," he went on slowly. "If some fool like you, Jacques—whom I have taken across my knee many times when you would have meddled with my forge, and not many years ago at that—if such a fool ask the question, thinking to have sport with me, then shall he have the answer. I say Count Charles de Charolais."

"Do you hear that, comrades? Tite himself—" began Rochet with great bluster.

"Yes, they heard, never fear," broke in Tite; "but the truth is, they know us for what we are. They know that, left to myself, I'd shout Charlotel with the best of them, and that you, left to yourself, and with no chance of making a show, wouldn't shout anything. You've grown a good bit of hair, and 'tis well you have, for it serves to cover as dirty a face as there is in Dinant. You make sport of me, Jacques Rochet. Ha! Come on, then, and see how you fare."

The challenge thus thrown in his teeth, the other's blustering air subsided suddenly. Despite his size, he was a craven at heart, and, moreover, was well aware of the corded muscle beneath Tite's leathern jerkin. Therefore he said sullenly:

"Ha! You, too, would play upon the white hairs that——"

But here a great roar of laughter shook the air, and there were loud cries of "Tite! Tite!" and many upliftings of beakers in his direction.

Through it all the Sieur Giraud had sat silently lis-

tening and waiting for the onset on Tite he felt sure would come. His hand had fallen upon his hilt, for he found a growing liking for this old man arising within him, and would have surely taken his part. As Tite again sat down beside him, he felt constrained to murmur:

"Well played, Tite!"

"You'll hear no more from him; the wind is out of him for a while," answered Tite grimly; and as he did so the landlord approached and whispered that the repast was ready in a room up-stairs. They rose and followed him, Tite coming in for much banter as they left the room.

Hungry men are but little given to talk, and the two scarce exchanged a word till they had disposed of the repast the landlord set before them. At length the Sieur Giraud lay back in his chair and spoke with much feeling.

"The saints bless you, Tite; 'tis the first proper meal I have seen this fortnight!" he said thankfully, and added with some compunction, "Yet I would that Monsieur Vignolles were here to share with us."

"Mayhap he'll stick closer by us another time," answered Tite grimly.

From the room below came loud shouting, in which the name Lenoir was repeated again and again. Evidently the gathering were toasting his renown.

The Sieur Giraud leaned his elbows on the table and seemed much interested.

"Tite, who is this Gaspard Lenoir?" he asked. "By my faith, some right have I to ask, since through a lying tale of him I wellnigh lost my life."

"The devil! And in what way could you be concerned with him?" asked Tite with some suspicion.

For some reason the Sieur Giraud gave him no direct answer, but laughed bitterly.

"'Tis of small consequence, save to myself, now that the affair is over," he said; "but, Tite, you draw too long a bow when you show such fearful distrust of a man reduced to my state. However, if you choose not to answer such simple question, have your way, for to argue with such stubborn bull-head as you are is a folly I'd ne'er essay."

The Sieur Giraud's purposely careless tone had its expected effect upon Tite.

"Faith, speak not of my having any fear of aught you can do even were you so disposed," he answered. "Once, maybe, you, like all the rest of them at Namur, would have given much to lay hands on this Gaspard Lenoir, but you know what such attempt would mean to you now."

He paused and, by pantomime, graphically illustrated the dismemberment of his own body, which the other noted in grim silence. Then he went on:

"I said naught of not answering your question, and 'twas you who accorded none to my own. Howsomever, that's no affair of mine, since you are the Sieur Giraud and I only Tite, the outlaw; and so, probably, it shall remain to the end of time. What I know of Gaspard Lenoir is easy enough told you. A sixmonth ago it was he came here from Liège. An old woman who lives in a hovel in the Rue Basse, close under the western wall, gives him shelter when he is in Dinant; but he's abroad much of the time. A strange sort is that old wench, by my faith!"

"Perchance 'tis some kin of his," said the Sieur Giraud.

"Nay, for she's been known here for years," an-

swered Tite. "'Tis said that she was once one of a band of minstrels and mummers at the court of Charles VII.; but saints! she has become but a witch now, and devil a man or woman is there in Dinant but crosses the street before her hut for fear of the evil eye."

"Yet the man seems well enough known here," said the Sieur Giraud.

"Did you once hear him speak, then would you have small wonder at that," answered Tite, "though, by my faith, he is little more than a lad in years. Being much in the hills, ne'er have I heard him, but 'tis said his tirade against the Burgundians is such that none may listen unmoved, and certain it is that the people here fair take pattern after what he says."

"Tite," said the Sieur Giraud suddenly, "a great longing has come over me to see this man Lenoir, on whose head the Count de Charolais has set a price. It is a curiosity born of considerable interest that prompts me, so much so that methinks I will go to the town-hall to-night."

"I had it in mind myself," answered Tite.

"Then it only remains to find Monsieur Vignolles, since he would wish to be of the party," said the Sieur Giraud. "Let us then to Madame Vaucler's, for 'tis already long past mid-day."

With that they rose and, after Tite had quitted the heavy score, betook themselves to their lodging. Madame Vaucler had returned only a half-hour before; but there was no sign of Monsieur Vignolles.

When the afternoon passed, and still he put in no appearance, the Sieur Giraud became truly a prey to fear for his safety, and even Tite betrayed some measure of anxiety. Therefore they again sallied forth to the market-place, but there, as well as in the neighbouring

streets, their inquiries met with no success. The mere fact that Monsieur Vignolles's head was swathed in bandages was of small aid to them, since heads so bound up were too common in Dinant to attract notice. One man, in truth, they found who believed to have seen the one they searched; but naught did he know of whither he had gone. So it was that at last they gave up the search in despair and returned to their quarters; but Madame Vaucler had still no news of the missing one.

Under the light of the one guttering candle—for darkness had now settled upon the town—they sat sullenly down to their wretched evening meal, and for the time, in their disappointment, all thought of Lenoir and the town-hall had fled their minds.

Meanwhile the crowd was rapidly mustering in the market-place, this time not the angry, roaring mob of the morning, but a jesting and expectant throng that took its crushing in all good-nature. The huge torches which some of them bore sent their unsteady and dancing glare over heads as closely packed as the bodies beneath them would allow. Some there were who even bawled snatches of song; others shouted in chorus some vituperative or obscene doggerel, always having for its mark the Count de Charolais. Yet the drawn and misery-ridden faces of all these people gave the lie to the hilarity they would have had appear, and their mood was but a forced one. Real merriment rings true; but this mock substitute jarred discordantly upon the ear as a reckless makeshift for suffering.

And then with the first stroke of eight the great doors of the town-hall flew back and the one they awaited came forth and stood upon the steps above their head. Behind him came a half-score vagabond townsmen who had constituted themselves a committee to sup-

port the speaker. The town-hall itself had been in the possession of the people since the untimely attempt of the magistrates to enforce order.

The crowd rose to the man Lenoir with one great cry of welcome, and he smiled and, leaning against a pillar, waited till they should have done.

In truth, Tite had not been wrong in terming him little more than a lad. Save for the dark and pointed growth upon his upper lip, his face was devoid of hair, and he could scarce have attained more than two and a score years at the utmost. In figure he was small, almost puny against the background of sturdy townsmen who had escorted him. His dress was that of an artisan, from the heavy shoes and coarse hose to the leathern jerkin half-hidden under the ample folds of his sleeveless blouse. From beneath a small, round cap with leaden ornament his dark hair fell straight to his shoulders.

Two or three times he made an effort to speak, only to awaken another outburst of cheering; but at last he suddenly stepped forward to the margin of the stone whereon he stood and, with almost a petulant air, stretched forth his hand. The tumult gradually died away to a dead stillness.

"Men of Dinant——"

His voice was almost shrill, so high had he pitched it that it might carry well out among them; yet there was a magnetic and clear quality in it that might go far to explain the hold he had on his hearers.

"Ay, and women of Dinant as well," went on Lenoir, "since what I have to say concerns you as much as any. Full well I know you come not here to listen to such poor speech as I might offer you, but to learn the truth of what goes on to the north—at Namur."

A low murmur of assent ran round the assem-

blage, and the sea of haggard faces looked up at him eagerly.

"For over a month the Burgundians have been gathering there, as you know," Lenoir continued, "and now August has half run its course. 'Tis madness to think the descent upon us will be long delayed; nor will it, indeed, since this very morning their army began crossing the Meuse."

The utmost disorder followed on this announcement, loud cries of "Let them come!" mingling with wrathful remonstrances against the interruption. When some quiet again was obtained, Lenoir spoke rapidly.

"This means that in three to four days' time they will be before the walls. Last night even some of them fell upon a band of Companions yonder in the hills, scarce a league distant, and butchered those they laid hands on without mercy. This I learned as I came through the hills to-day, and such was the fate of those who followed Marcelle the Mad."

"Marcelle the Mad!"

It came as one great horrified cry from the multitude, and then silence.

"Ay, 'twas none other than her band that so suffered; yet Marcelle herself was unhurt, so had I the story."

"And so 'tis true!" shouted a burly individual who, by way of indicating some official post that he held, wore a battered steel helmet far back upon his bullet-head. "And so 'tis true, for with these eyes did I see Marcelle pass out of the gates this morning."

"And so it is that with every step the Burgundians take your danger increases tenfold," cried Lenoir. "And what, men of Dinant, have you done to provide against the evil day? Ne'er was there town easier of defence

than this. On one side, the river; on the others, a wall that no man among you may span with his arms, and four-score towers to lend it added strength; what more would you have had? By now you might have taken such measures to arm and organise yourselves as would have warranted you in despising those who set upon you. But no; rather must you take to brawling in the street, to swilling strong drink that your misery might be less plain, and now it is too late!"

A moment the crowd hung silent at this scathing rebuke; then one—he was that Jacques Rochet who had met with defeat at Tite's hands—raised his great voice on high.

"Too late! What folly do you speak, Gaspard?" he cried. "If we have been idle, 'tis that King Louis and the people of Liège will ne'er sit quiet while we fight alone."

A storm of approval greeted this sally and many dark and challenging looks shot toward Lenoir. This sort of speech was not what they had come to hear. Yet the man never flinched before them, but spoke even more shrilly and with added vehemence.

"King Louis! Such help as he may give you—he in Paris and you in Dinant—that, in truth, you may expect. I tell you I have talked with those who know his very mind, and ne'er may you look to him for a single lance. Among the Burgundian army is the Constable of France. Think you he would be there were the king in the field against him? As for the people of Liège, bah! They are too much like yourselves—too given to talk to be reckoned on. If they ever move, 'twill be when all is over. And now, listen to the message I bear you. Well enough you know my hatred for all the House of Burgundy; some of you, at least, followed me to the walls

of Bouvignes one night not so long ago. Well enough you know my heart, and how I would rejoice seeing those who march upon us overthrown and taught to meddle not with our city so long as this world lasts."

A loud shout of assent, yet with a tentative note in its depths, greeted this, and he went on quickly.

"You know that your interests are my interests, and what I would advise you is what I deem best. Therefore, I say to you, cast aside the veil of false hopes that blinds you. You have chosen to idle and are but a rabble against this score and ten thousand trained men who approach. You—we all of us, have had our fling at the House of Burgundy, and now some of us must pay for it, since the mass of you are but half men. Make such peace as you may with them, and make it while there still is time. This is the message I bring you—I, Gaspard Lenoir, who knows of what he speaks."

An instant of silence, and then a furious tumult ensued. "Betrayed! Traitor! Seize him!" were some of the cries prominent above the others.

"By God, 'twas not so long ago, as he says, that this Gaspard was leading us boldly enough to Bouvignes!" roared Jacques Rochet, climbing upon the shoulders of those in front that he might be seen. "And now he prates of cringing before Charlotel, that he may wring our necks one after the other."

"Fool, 'tis that I would save your lives, such as I may," cried Lenoir. "Before, I, too, was blinded by hatred of the Burgundians; but I know death when I see it looking me in the face. If I have erred, you have the satisfaction of knowing I shall be the first to suffer."

"Ay, you the first, and who'd be the next?" cried Rochet, for it had become a duel between them. "Perchance you, Jean Raes; or you, Guy Beaujeu; or any one

of you others Charlotel might deem worthy of hanging. Ha! You will like this, you good people, just when we are ready to crumple the Burgundians. I tell you this counsel is treason, whether it come from Gaspard Lenoir or another!"

A thunderous shout of acclamation broke forth, and like a devouring wave, the crowd rolled toward the steps. It was fortunate for Lenoir that those who had accompanied him thither were, for an instant, too stupefied at this unlooked-for ending to make a move. It afforded him time to dive within the open doorway back of him, and flee for the little garden behind, which, in turn, by a narrow gate gave upon the street.

Thus it was that the Sieur Giraud and Tite, who had at last remembered their resolve to be present before the town-hall, hurrying through this dark back street, came into violent collision with Lenoir. The mishap upset that worthy upon the pavement, but he quickly regained his feet and made off, disappearing round the nearest corner.

The next moment the Sieur Giraud and Tite were engulfed in the cursing, yelling mob that streamed from the garden. Deeming it a personal attack, right nobly did they strike out at such heads as came within reach, and soon had widened the circle about them. Then, having room, the Sieur Giraud got his sword free and the pressing crowd fell back farther at sight of the ugly steel and the way 'twas played.

Yet of a sudden the Sieur Giraud paused and his point fell, and Tite, having disposed of one who would have throttled him, looked at him in some wonder. The crowd, seeing they had not to do with the one they sought, passed headlong in both directions along the street.

And still a moment longer the Sieur Giraud stood

motionless, for, in the darkness of the narrow way, for one instant he had caught sight of a face that gave him pause for thought—the face of Crépin Brune. Then the man had disappeared in full flight after Lenoir. Had he been nearer, the Sieur Giraud would have struck him down without mercy, for, besides his back reckoning to settle, there was the chance of Crépin's exposing him as a former Burgundian. This would be a death-warrant in Dinant, as the Sieur Giraud knew only too well; and he breathed easier in the belief that the man either had not seen him, or had failed to recognise him in the dark.

But, of course, there was always the morrow.

CHAPTER XVII

AT THE WIDOW GALIOT'S

FORTUNATE, indeed, had the Lady Agathe accounted herself on learning what exterminating calamity had overtaken the band with which, for a short time, her life had been linked. At first she had been inclined to protest against the breathless pace Poncet and Moïse urged upon the women; but their wisdom had struck her forcibly enough when she and the other two were thrust through the already closing gates of Dinant.

Now that she knew what had occurred she could find naught but admiration for the clever way the men had managed to slip past the flank of the foe creeping up the gorge. It was, therefore, not strange that she should look on Marcelle as her preserver, and should listen with rapt attention to her recital of what had taken place. For it was direct to the house whither Petite Maman had conducted the Lady Agathe that Marcelle had flown on leaving the others at the gate.

Yet her stay had been much shorter than the Lady Agathe would have desired, and after assuring herself that the latter's wants were being met and leaving a few pieces of gold with her, Marcelle had departed to return only at a late hour when sheer fatigue had forbid any further talk between them.

With the morning she was gone from the house, leaving word that she had gone back into the hills, but would

return ere long. Her caution to remain close indoors was lost on the Lady Agathe, who would not have thought of venturing into the turbulent streets. No such fear had Petite Maman, however. Disdaining the offer of the widow Galiot, who lodged them, she had confidently fared forth in search of supplies for the larder, returning about noon greatly excited over the brawl in the market-place.

Now the remains of the evening repast long since had been cleared away, and Petite Maman had retired to the kitchen where she mostly kept herself with Bonne Fleuron and the widow Galiot.

In one of the other two rooms the Lady Agathe threw herself upon her bed. Her gaze was fixed upon the dingy ceiling, and again she went over in her mind what Marcelle had told her, and speculated as to the probable time of her return, for, in truth, she now held this girl very dear in her heart.

Of a sudden there came to her ears from the kitchen sounds that brought her trembling to her feet—a quick scuffle, a hoarse exclamation in a man's voice, mingled with the women's shrill outcries, the quick slam of a door, and then a deafening din as though all there had fallen to beating upon pans and kettles. Ere she might move, Petite Maman came striding into the room, her face hot, but triumphant.

"Now that we've got him safe, I don't mind telling you!" she cried, raising her voice above the clatter that now came with added force through the open door.

"Got him! What do you mean?" gasped the Lady Agathe.

"I mean none other than Master Busybody, who must needs follow me home from the market-place this noon," was the answer. "Faith, the fool thought I'd

not know him with his head swaddled in rags; nor did I, till my foot was on the very door-sill. However, he'll do no one any hurt now, if such was his intent. I spoke not of it before, for fear 'twould make you fret, which Marcelle said was to be avoided."

"But who—what——"

A louder crash than ever mingled with the man's muffled curses sent Petite Maman into a spasm of laughter.

"Ha! 'Tis he will know *Dinanderie* the next time he sees it!" she cried, and shook her brawny arm in derision in the direction whence came the racket.

In truth, the man would gain some acquaintance with this ware, since the widow Galiot, having been a dealer therein in a small way, on trade becoming paralysed, had stored her surplus stock in that very closet.

"All the afternoon has he been prowling about the house, front and back, till he could make up his mind which promised best," went on Petite Maman. "When we saw him start for the kitchen we gave him free field and an open window; the rest was a shove and a twist of the door-battens. He scarce knows yet how he came inside that closet."

She laughed long and immoderately.

"But who is this man?" cried the Lady Agathe wildly.

Bonne Fleuron thrust her head through the doorway.

"You'd best be ready to lend us a hand, Petite Maman," she said. "The battens are coming loose and he'll be out in a moment."

Indeed, the man had by now ceased his cursing and devoted himself to straining at the door. Petite Maman hitched her sleeves upward over the elbows and started

for the fray, yet she paused long enough to say to the Lady Agathe:

"Who is the man? Faith, you should know him well enough, since 'tis for you he comes nosing round here, methinks. 'Tis none other than the gay spark that came with you the day Tite brought you to camp."

"Monsieur Vignolles!" cried the Lady Agathe, and even with her words the closet door fell outward with a loud crash, and the man within shot over it into the room.

In an instant the three women would have been upon him, for they knew not the name of fear, but the Lady Agathe had flown to the doorway.

"Stop!" she cried in a tone that carried far with these women. "I will answer for the man; stand away!"

A moment they hesitated, then fell back a pace, so that she stood face to face with the intruder.

It was, indeed, Monsieur Vignolles, but his general aspect could hardly have passed as imposing. His doublet had worked its way about his ears, and his face was flushed with his efforts till it seemed fit to burst. The handle of a brass kettle had caught upon his sword-hilt and tilted the weapon the reverse way it was intended to be worn, and about one ankle was a broad metal cake-ring, through which he had unwittingly thrust his foot. All this, taken with his bandaged head, served to greatly heighten the effect his presence produced.

Without a word the Lady Agathe and he stood looking at each other; then he scowled and tried to speak. Twice he repeated this, but the words would not come, and then, whether from something in the other's eye or from his own predilection to make light of any mishap, he kicked the ring from his foot and laughed aloud.

There was something so infectious in his sudden outburst of mirth and so ludicrous in the figure he presented that despite their hostile attitude the three women involuntarily joined in his laughter. Even the Lady Agathe smiled when her first shock at seeing his wounded state had passed and his manner had given assurance that his hurts, at all events, were not of a serious character.

However, this relapse was but momentary, for whatever views the Lady Agathe might hold regarding this intruder, Petite Maman and the others had a most decided notion as to the proper manner of dealing with him. Therefore, as Monsieur Vignolles succeeded in disengaging the kettle from his hilt and let it fall clattering to the floor, Petite Maman planted herself before him, arms akimbo, and a menacing look in her eyes.

"And now, Master Meddler," she said, "before we call in those from the street who will make short work of you if I speak out what I know, we'd hear what devilry you had in mind in following me here. Faith, if 'twere not that I have heard you fought well yesterday in the hills, I'd not give you this chance, for once you were Burgundian, and for aught I know would still play their tricks. Marcelle said she forbid you and the other making any trial to spy out where we were."

"Have you ended, woman?" asked Monsieur Vignolles drily. "Then hear me for a moment. It was last night that Marcelle imposed such caution. Had she not gone to the hills suddenly she would have arranged some way of our seeing the Lady Agathe before now."

"So it was to spy your way to my lady that you came?" cried Petite Maman.

"My dear woman, did you have any thought 'twas

to gaze on your still fair but withering charms?" replied monsieur, including the three in his sweeping gesture. "Beyond a doubt I did come to see the Lady Agathe. And now, listen; you've had your fill of sport, thanks to my running fairly into your hands. In return, give me a moment or two with the Lady Agathe. Whether I was, or am, or will be, Burgundian, has naught to do with the question which concerns her alone; that I swear to you."

The women burst into laughter.

"Oh, and is it so; that is all you would ask?" cried Petite Maman. "'Tis likely that we, being put here to attend to my lady and to keep such as you from coming near her, would take up with such scheme."

"I would hear what Monsieur Vignolles has to say to me."

The Lady Agathe, as she spoke these words, stepped forward among them.

"Since he has found his way hither 'tis no fault of yours," she went on. "To speak of delivering him to the people of the town as a Burgundian is folly, for had Marcelle wished that she would have accomplished it long ere this. As for any censure you may fear, I will answer to her for that."

In truth, the Lady Agathe now believed her influence over Marcelle very great.

"I have no liking for such business," grumbled Petite Maman, "yet Marcelle did bid us pander to your wishes, and faith, I see not the harm in a word or two between lovers."

The Lady Agathe gasped.

"But it is not—we are not—" she stammered.

"You are blessed with discernment beyond the ordinary," broke in Monsieur Vignolles, bowing suavely to

Petite Maman; "for the Lady Agathe and I are lovers—lovers of the admirable common-sense you are beginning to display. We have, then, your royal permission to withdraw?"

"I have no mind to spy upon you, if that's what you mean," answered Petite Maman. "Since my lady will have it so, I may say no more. The saints be praised, I was ended with such nonsense years ago!"

The Lady Agathe's face was crimson; but Monsieur Vignolles seemed to take no note of it.

"The more's the pity," he said suavely, "yet 'tis said that the very years which so cruelly despoil us of passion do bring in its stead a placid erudition that renders the loss of small moment. Such must be your reward, Petite Maman."

The woman looked at him sharply; but his face showed all seriousness and she waved him toward the door.

He held it open till the Lady Agathe had passed through, then followed, closing it behind him. After a moment he again thrust it open smartly. As he had expected it came into violent contact with the head of Petite Maman, which head had been inclined in listening attitude on the other side.

"A thousand pardons," he exclaimed, as though he made no note of the eavesdropping. "I merely returned to say that as I have fasted since morning I would esteem highly whate'er you might do to ease the craving within me. In payment therefor I would offer you this in lieu of proper coin."

He fumbled at his neck and drew forth by the attached cord a golden medallion encased in leather.

"By my faith, it has the worth of two gold crowns," cried Petite Maman, her eyes alight with greed. "Ay,

you shall have what we possess of food when your talk shall be ended. Hand it over."

"That I will when I have received its value," he answered, and coolly replaced it next his breast. "Two gold crowns 'tis worth, as you say, and more; yet for the food I stand in greater need. Fear not, you shall have it if you bestir yourselves."

With that he again closed the door and the scuffle of feet told him that his wishes were being met. He turned and, crossing to the front of the room, faced the Lady Agathe.

"Close work, my lady," he said, and wiped a bead of sweat from his brow. "Hang me, but methought at one time they meant to turn me over to the *canaille* in the streets. As it is they will give us but a moment and we must speak quickly. You are closely watched here, my lady?"

"What need of such precaution, monsieur, since I have neither the mood nor the opportunity for flight?" she answered.

"Then the matter is simplified," he said with evident relief.

His tone would have been less thankful had he known that even at the moment the widow Galiot was stealing stealthily out at the back and so round through the garden to the street, down which she ran with all speed.

"What mean you, monsieur?" asked the Lady Agathe in some wonder.

"This, and this alone, my lady, that however much we must bless Marcelle for having taken such measures for your safety, this very refuge she has selected will prove your undoing if you remain here. Nay, hear me out! Dinant ere many days must become little better than a hell, for the Burgundian army will move upon it

soon. Perchance even to-day they will take up the march. You must leave here while there is yet time."

"Am I then ne'er to have any peace, monsieur?" cried the Lady Agathe, as the full significance of his words fell upon her. "Against my will was I sent on the road to Bruges; against my will was I ordered here from the hills—though for that, in truth, I am grateful—and now you would have me leave Dinant, perchance to face even worse fate. No, Monsieur Vignolles, I believe you think only of serving me well; but I will not leave Dinant."

"My lady, there can be no worse fate than for you to remain here. You know not what a shambles this town will become, once Count Charles gains entrance, as he surely will, else would you be mad to speak thus. For you to steal from this house will not be too difficult. 'Twas to give you opportunity that I arranged for food with the women. While I make pretence of eating and hold their minds, do you go forth by the front way. I will wait till you have had time to gain the street back of the garden, and then make a bolt over the wall by the way I came. Before they can give the alarm we shall be far enough away and lost in the crowd."

She seemed unmoved by what he said.

"No, monsieur. I thank you, but I see not what you offer me better than my present state," she answered. "In truth, you speak of freedom; but what would you suggest; that again I should roam the hills helpless and alone?"

"My lady, you do me wrong," he said with some dignity. "Since you would have such support as two stout hearts could afford you. Ay, on the morrow, into the hills you would go, 'tis true, but 'twould be on the way to Dauphiné, and an end of all your misfortune."

"Dauphiné!"

"Ay, Dauphiné, my lady, for thither shall you go. You have no choice but to trust to us. Have you heart to remain here while Count Charles lays the walls in dust and piles the dead thick upon such ruin? Have you heart for what will follow once he enters, and for your own capture as well? No, a thousand times no, my lady, you cannot be so mad."

She shuddered.

"In pity's name, speak not of my falling into the hands of Count Charles now," she cried. "Methinks he'd have less mercy upon me than upon some of these others."

"And for myself and the Sieur Giraud the question is the same," he said. "Therefore——"

She started suddenly.

"The Sieur Giraud! He was, then, this other of whom you spoke?" she cried. "Sooner would I trust——"

Monsieur Vignolles stamped almost angrily upon the floor.

"My Lady Agathe," he said sharply, "ne'er was mortal more deceived than you have been! The Sieur Giraud is as innocent of what you hold against him as I am myself; that I swear. The whole affair at the vine-grower's was the doing of one man, Crépin Brune, and the Sieur Giraud was but tricked into seeming to share in the conspiracy."

"The Sieur Giraud innocent!" she gasped. "Yet Marcelle ne'er said——"

"If Marcelle let you believe in his guilt, 'twas from some motive of her own," he answered impatiently; "and methinks I begin to see reason in much I have taken for madness in that quarter. Be that as it may,

I tell you the Sieur Giraud ne'er has swerved from what a fair-minded man would do. God knows, 'tis only chance that brings me here ahead of him, my lady."

"If I have wronged him so, what can I say to him that would condone such mistake," she said, half to herself. "Yet why should Marcelle so mislead me? Why——"

She paused suddenly, and a moment stood looking into Monsieur Vignolles's eyes.

"There is one thing that might induce a woman to take such course," he said. "Methinks in this moment it has come to you—jealousy, I mean."

"Is it possible?" she gasped; and then, as she ran over in her mind what had gone before, she saw how well such solution fitted Marcelle's every action.

"The—the Sieur Giraud—does he suspect this love she bears him?" asked the Lady Agathe.

"Methinks such thought ne'er has crossed his mind," he answered; "nor would it e'er have struck me, save for a look I caught upon her face in the moment before the fight at the camp. The Sieur Giraud thinks of you alone, my lady."

"You, at least, are a good friend of the Sieur Giraud, Monsieur Vignolles."

"I like the man, my lady," he answered, and added with a smile, "and our tastes seem to run in the same direction, perchance too much so for the peace of mind of us both."

"I see not how such agreement of mind can lead to aught but content," she said, and half turned from him.

"Yet if two men set their hearts on attaining the same favour, one is doomed to disappointment in the end, my lady," he answered.

"But surely until that end each may be supported by the hope of gaining what he desires," said the Lady Agathe in a low tone.

"Not when the prize is awarded in advance, my lady. To cherish such hope or thought then would ill become a man, to say naught of a friend."

"You take too much for granted, monsieur. Some might call you faint-hearted, and with reason."

A moment her eyes met his, and then fell.

"By my faith, I would I knew whether you spoke of the same thing I do!" he exclaimed.

She smiled and again gave him a fleeting look.

"Would you so term me, monsieur? Fie upon you then; 'tis small gallantry you show."

He started forward.

"My lady, you knew 'twas of you I spoke—and—and you bid me hope? Then you are not pledged to the Sieur Giraud?"

For answer a twinkle came into her blue eyes, and she curved her lips in a mocking pout.

"Again I seem to be riding the Bruges road," she said slowly, and her gaze was far away, "and beside me rides one whom they would force me to wed. Through the gathering darkness of a storm his voice falls railingly on my ear, 'Wed myself? Not to the best lady in the land, were she to beseech me thereto on bended knee! We shall get on better if we meet our punishment with the proper spirit, my lady, and——'"

She might speak no more for the arms that closed about her and the hand that gently came over her lips.

"My lady! Agathe! Taunt me not with what were but the vapourings of a fool full of his own conceit," cried Monsieur Vignolles. "Oh, Agathe, Agathe, is it true? Am I standing here holding you in my arms, dear,

or is this another of those wild dreams that have possessed me of late?"

"Beyond a doubt you are so holding me, monsieur," she gasped.

"Hilaire, dear heart—Hilaire; the name no woman e'er has given me, save my mother in far-away Luxembourg," he said, and kissed her.

Then he held her from him and assumed a serious air.

"And have I been such a blind fool long, Agathe? I'll be sworn you hated me that day we left Namur."

"It grieves me to say it, but I fear I did, Hilaire," she answered. "Yet that very day saw the beginning of the great love I bear you—the beginning, I say, because such love may not spring up in a day."

"The beginning; and when did this first come upon you, Agathe?" he asked softly.

"I may not be sure, Master Inquisitor," she replied, "but methinks 'twas at the very moment you declared you ne'er would wed me willingly; ay, and even spoke contemptuously, as though you would gladly cast me from you, if you might. Then I began to dread you less, Hilaire, and see you for what you were."

"And the Sieur Giraud?"

"Hilaire, let us not speak of what might have been!" she said, and clasped her hands about his neck. "A maid may love but once as I love you, dear; and I now know that what I felt for him was but the great respect a woman must feel for such a man. It breaks my heart to think that he soon must know."

Monsieur Vignolles drew her to him.

"Yes, Agathe," he said with a touch of sadness in his tone, "it will be a grievous blow to him, coming after all that he has suffered; and pity 'tis that in this fresh trial he should see me the gainer."

"It may not be otherwise, Hilaire," she answered softly; "nor would you have it so, methinks."

He looked down into the eyes upturned to his and kissed her again; then spoke quickly.

"And now, Agathe, there is but to get away from this house with all speed. Purposely, I waited till darkness before venturing to enter, and now 'twill serve our project well. First to see the Sieur Giraud, and then, for to-night, we must find some refuge for you; but with the dawn and the opening of the gates, we shall be gone. You will go, Agathe?"

"To the end of the world with you, now, dear," she answered. "Methinks I should have gone, anyway."

"Once without the walls I shall breathe freer," he said. "Anything is better than the thought of your remaining in Dinant. Such things as you need gather quickly, while I distract Petite Maman and the others. The quarter of an hour should suffice you, and in that time I will join you in the back street. Fly, Agathe!"

With that he hastily embraced her, and stood watching till she had disappeared across the hall into the other room. Then, with a triumphant air, he turned and flung open the kitchen door. Within, it was as dark as a pocket save for the feeble ray that came through the door behind him, and the dull night-light that showed dim through the window. In the opening of the latter he made out the figure of Petite Maman.

Ere he could speak she hissed a sharp warning and crossed softly to him, her hand on her lips.

"The devil has bewitched this house to-night," she whispered, "for now some other is prowling about the garden. 'Tis for that I put out the light. The others are watching from the back gate. If you know aught of who comes——"

"Peace, woman!" he said in a low tone; "I came alone, and believe that none other knows of my presence here. You are sure some shadow has not alarmed you?"

"Bah! I am not one who is fearful of naught!" she muttered. "Come, then, yourself, and cast your gaze beyond yonder elm."

So saying, she drew him softly to the window, and even as she did so a thought suddenly struck him. Might not the Sieur Giraud have discovered this house for himself? If so, he, too, would so reconnoitre it before essaying an entrance.

Monsieur Vignolles thrust his head forth quickly and peered into the gloom.

On the instant two forms rose out of the shrubs beneath the ledge, and four sinewy hands closed about his throat. Without a sound he toppled head-foremost into the garden, and four others coming to the aid of the first two, he was quickly gagged and then borne away.

A moment one of his captors lingered to thrust his head through the window.

"Well played, Petite Maman!" he said hoarsely. "Faith, I'm not sorry I saw you in the market-place this morning, for this Burgundian is worth more than gold to us, once Charlotel takes the town. Let me but lay hands on the other in the same fashion."

"I know naught of the other, Crépin," answered the woman.

"Nor do I now; but I will ere long," growled Crépin, for it was none other, "and he it is I must have, since Charlotel would give his hand to seize him. Things are coming to a head here, Petite Maman. To-night they drove Gaspard Lenoir from the town-hall—ay, and would have had his life had they caught him, think of that!"

"And why that?" asked the woman.

"Because he told them to make peace; but I've no time for more, woman. You know where word will reach me—at Jacques Rochet's, where you sent to-night. Let me know if you hear of or see the Sieur Giraud, and I'll make as fine a lady of you as walks. *Adieu!*"

With that he melted into the darkness, and Petite Maman turned to rejoin the other women who came in from the garden.

"Small use did I ever have for Crépin Brune," she said; "but so long as this does Marcelle no harm, methinks 'twill prove a master-stroke for us. If any women be spared by Charlotel, we'll be the ones. Crépin's naught to please the eye; but he looks a long way ahead."

With which shrewd observation the others agreed.

Even as Monsieur Vignolles was dragged so rudely from the window, the Lady Agathe came from her room, bearing a small bundle. She dreaded going forth into the streets, and feared that her appearance might excite some repulsive curiosity. Yet it was but a short distance she had to go, and, steadying herself with this thought, she slipped the bolt and stood listening a moment to assure herself that she was not observed. She marvelled somewhat that no sound of voices reached her from the kitchen; but ere any explanation suggested itself, the door suddenly was thrust inward upon her, and Marcelle staggered into the hall. She lurched so that the Lady Agathe, dropping her bundle, caught her quickly to save her from falling.

"Marcelle, what has befallen you?" she cried, and closed the door again.

In truth, there was reason for her question, for in

the light of the single candle which shone dimly from the adjoining room, Marcelle's face was deathly white, and her eyes rolled vacantly in their sockets. The Lady Agathe felt her own gaze shrink as Marcelle spoke.

"It was as I came through the gate—no, it was in the hills, long ago that seems, and I almost told him I loved him, and—and then that other, she came—she was always between us. Then he would have killed some one—no, it was not he, but no matter, I—I, Marcelle the Mad, gnawed his bow-string so that naught came of it."

"Marcelle!" cried the Lady Agathe, trembling with fear of the other's jumbled words. "Marcelle, calm yourself. It is I, Agathe, who listens."

"Agathe!" muttered Marcelle weakly. "That was the name of the other who was always coming between—and afterward there was a great fire—the hilltops were all ablaze, and through the smoke the arrows were falling like the drops of rain."

She wrenched herself from the Lady Agathe's grasp, and stood swaying to and fro as she went on in her horrible, measured tones:

"Like rain it was; but a rain that bore death to all it touched—myself, did I not see the head of poor Ulrique Cadet leap from her very shoulders— Ah, 'twas a time for leaping—heads were leaping—the hot flames were leaping—and—and hearts were leaping. But 'twas I showed *him* the spring and the way out—and—and because of that he—he asked me which was the—the true Marcelle. Ha! Ha! What a question to ask—to ask me! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

The Lady Agathe recoiled and shuddered at the awful laugh.

"That was at the gate," continued Marcelle almost

in a whisper. "At the gate as we stood in the dark—with none near—he asked which was the true Marcelle—all because—because he—he never had known the one. Ay, that—that was it—he never had—had known the—the one."

As she ended she half spun round, and again would have fallen but for the Lady Agathe's arms. And now she hung so limp and heavy that the Lady Agathe perceived that her shattered senses had left her. With a sigh, she bore her to her own bed and gently laid her down, and as she did so saw the great swollen bruise upon the side of Marcelle's head. Was she dead? No; a feeble flutter still met the Lady Agathe's searching hand.

What to do?

The Lady Agathe was torn by conflicting emotions. Here was this girl to whom she owed much, even life, stricken, as she believed, to death. How could she leave her? Yet, yonder behind the garden wall, the man she loved waited for her to come to him. Did she summon the women, all hope of her escaping must for a time be lost, and time might mean everything. But with what heart could she steal away to leave Marcelle to die from lack of care? If the girl had deceived her, she knew now why it had been, and pitied rather than censured her for it. Well she knew the horrors of remaining in this town, and she shuddered at the thought of again encountering the Count de Charolais, while, without in the street, safety, happiness, and the idol of her heart were calling her to come.

She looked at the frail, unconscious figure before her, pallid and cold to the very finger-tips.

The next instant she glided into the hall and throwing her bundle under the bed, went swiftly to the kitchen door and flung it open.

"Petite Maman," she said, "and you, Bonne, come quickly! Marcelle has met with an accident and is ill nigh unto death, methinks. Come!"

Thus did the Lady Agathe cast aside love, happiness, and safety for what she deemed her duty.

Had Monsieur Vignolles, in truth, awaited her, as she believed, would his love for her have been lessened by the choice she made?

CHAPTER XVIII

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DOOR

FOR some time after the shock of their encounter in the street behind the town-hall the Sieur Giraud and Tite devoted themselves to searching for some trace of Monsieur Vignolles in the rapidly thinning crowd. But this night few among that shouting multitude had thought for any affair save the one they had just witnessed, and still fewer were those who stayed to vouchsafe them any answer to their queries.

At length, fagged and discouraged, the two drew up in one of the by-streets, and bitterly both did curse the remissness which had resulted in their being too late to see the throng before its breaking up. Yet, after all, it was possible that Monsieur Vignolles had made no part of it, and the more the Sieur Giraud pondered upon this the more certain he became that such was true.

"'Tis folly to carry our search farther, Tite," he said. "I make no more doubt the man has been foully dealt with. An unmindful wag of his tongue, and there are many in this town who would do him to death for the very allegiance he once held to the House of Burgundy. Ay, 'tis that has befallen him, methinks, for the man is over-given to speech and thinks little beforehand of what he says."

But Tite shook his head.

"Nay, for in such case the whole town would know of it," he answered. "Burgundians are not so plenty in

Dinant that the taking of one could pass unheeded. Monsieur may have met with foul play; but, if so, it has been without discovery of his identity being made."

He turned and, the Sieur Giraud following him, the two made their way slowly back to Madame Vaucler's, the mind of each busy trying to frame some hypothesis which would explain this sudden disappearance.

At length the Sieur Giraud spoke quickly.

"Tite, saw you that knave, Crépin, in the crowd behind the town-hall?"

Tite almost stopped in his walk.

"Crépin Brune?" he cried. "Nay, I saw naught of the rogue. Curse him; I made note, though, that he took good care to be away from camp when the others came at us."

The Sieur Giraud thought that he might enlighten Tite as to the cause of such absence, but refrained from doing so. Such explanation would involve telling of the attempt upon Count Charles, and Tite's hatred for the latter was too deep to make such tale advisable. At least, so the other thought.

"Some devilry's been afoot these many days and Crépin has had a hand in it, I'll be sworn," went on Tite. "Myself, I once saw him meet a stranger who came by horse yonder in the hills, and he's been away from camp too much for any fair purpose, since ne'er did he bring in aught whereby our pockets or bellies were the better filled."

"Such as the purse and velvets of the bishop's messenger, Tite, to say naught of the horses?" asked the Sieur Giraud and laughed; for there was much that was humourous to him in the old man's system of ethics whereby a "fair purpose" was betokened by the proceeds of brigandage.

"If a man's a man, he works for them that work for him," answered Tite drily. "But, however that may be, if this Crépin has found his way here, do you have a care lest he lay eyes upon you, for, by my faith, the whelp would expose you for the mere sport of seeing your head on a pike! Moreover, he's had no liking for you since the first day you came to the camp. This I tell you because, for one thing, methinks Marcelle would have no harm come to you, and for another, because 'tis not fit that any man should die of a cur's bite."

"A thousand thanks for the warning, Tite," said the Sieur Giraud, "but as it chances the affair will not be one-sided, for if Crépin would deliver me over as a Burgundian, so would I run him through at the first opportunity. And this with good reason, though I may tell you no more."

"The odds are against your doing aught against Crépin here in Dinant," said Tite as they mounted the steps of their lodgings, "yet, by St. Hubert, ne'er would I stand in the way of such essay!"

So saying he pounded on the door till Madame Vaucler unbarred it and gave them entrance.

From her they learned that Poncet, having found quarters for his parents, had sent word that he would pass the night with them. Should he be wanted, they were to send word to the address he gave.

Without more ado the two entered their room and cast themselves down to sleep, the Sieur Giraud on the bed and Tite on the floor. Yet sleep was strangely slow in coming to them. That this should be so in his own case was no matter for wonder to the Sieur Giraud, for his mind was filled with thoughts of the day's ill-luck—the disappearance of Monsieur Vignolles and, above all, the utter absence of clew as to the whereabouts of the

Lady Agathe. But why Tite should find slumber so reluctant to indulge him was matter for some wonder for of ordinary the man became as one dead the moment his head came to rest. Also, each time the Sieur Giraud chanced to turn, he caught the eye of Tite fixed upon him from beneath his blankets, and then his swift-following half-pretence of sleep. Of a truth, something more than mere restlessness was keeping the old man awake. Was it that he meditated some move when the other should be asleep? The Sieur Giraud determined to ascertain and to that end yawned heavily and settled into an attitude of drowsy comfort. In a few moments his deep, regular breathing penetrated to every corner of the room.

He had not been wrong in his conjecture, for, after waiting a short time, Tite rose stealthily from his coverings and stole softly from the room. A moment later the slow creaking of the outer door told of his departure into the street.

Elated at the success of his ruse, the Sieur Giraud only stayed to throw on his sword and then followed noiselessly. Whatever Tite might be planning, whether for his good or otherwise, he meant to know. As he thrust his head cautiously from the door, he saw the figure of Tite disappear round the next corner. There was no time to be lost. Hastily he closed the door behind him and made after Tite with all speed.

The streets were no longer crowded, yet enough were still abroad to render his chances against detection, at all events, even. Yet their very numbers were favourable to Tite's eluding his eye as he shot around some corner ahead. Therefore, the Sieur Giraud was forced to close up the space between them, and so, by many twistings through the town, they progressed till Tite sud-

denly stopped before a house and warily looked round. The Sieur Giraud, scarce two-score paces behind him, dodged behind a tree in the nick of time.

Having apparently assured himself that all was well, Tite thrust open the gate before the house and rapidly strode to the door, on which he sounded lightly. A shaft of light for a moment fell into the street as the door was opened in answer and then was blotted out as quickly.

There being no further need for such caution as he had till now used, the Sieur Giraud ran to the gate and examined the front of the house.

Shutters before the two windows kept all light within save what might sift through the tiny chinks at the sides. Naught could he learn of the interior here, and he hastened round to the back; but here, also, shutters had been put up for the night and he might gain no enlightenment as to the character of the place. Nor could he on either side hear any sound of voices from within. A short time he stood undecided, then quickly returned to the front door, slipping his sword free in its sheath as he mounted the two low steps. The next moment he knocked softly as Tite had done.

The sound of footsteps crossing the floor was followed by the unbolting of the door. As it started to open, the Sieur Giraud thrust his foot within, and, despite the resistance offered, followed with the rest of his body.

A low growl broke from the one who had answered his knock. It was none other than Tite himself, and the Sieur Giraud's hand left his hilt.

"What devil's contrivance brings you here?" cried the old man hotly.

"No devil's contrivance, but the proper desire any

man may have to know what's afoot when whatever that is may concern his life," answered the Sieur Giraud coolly. "What is this new game you play, Tite?"

"'Tis no affair of yours; therefore, get you gone and——"

At that instant the Sieur Giraud heard some one approaching the door on his right, and again his hand sought his sword. Tite shrugged his shoulders in disgust as the door flew open and the Lady Agathe stood before them.

"My lady!" cried the Sieur Giraud, and then whirled upon Tite. "So, all the time you have known where my Lady Agathe was, you gray fox?"

Tite ignored the question. He was chagrined at the failure of his manœuvre and sulked; but the Lady Agathe spoke quickly.

"Yes, he has known; but there is no time to discuss that. I have not yet heard what brings him here, save that 'tis something concerning Monsieur Vignolles which I would hear. Therefore, enter; but tread lightly, for Marcelle has but now fallen into a doze."

As she spoke the strokes of the clock in the distant town-hall counted the hour of eleven.

"Marcelle!" exclaimed both of the men, and Tite added, "She is then returned?"

"Ay, some two hours since," answered the Lady Agathe, leading them into the room and softly closing the door, "and wounded nigh to death, methought at first; but the leech has seen her and says all will be well if she be kept quiet. 'Tis a cruel blow she has received on the head, and at first she raved therefrom; but now she has her senses."

"And what says she of this mishap?" asked the Sieur Giraud.

"I have learned naught of it, for the leech forbade all talk to her and gave her some potion that was to bring sleep upon her," was the answer. "But 'tis clear she has met with this blow somewhere in the hills whither she would go this day."

"A thousand curses on my head that I went not after her as I was minded to!" cried Tite.

As for the Sieur Giraud, he was torn by two emotions, one the horror this news gave him and the other the wonderment he felt at seeing the Lady Agathe now treat him on the old footing, and as though naught ever had come between them. But before he might find any answer to this last, she spoke quickly:

"Yet come; I may not stay from Marcelle long. You come here for some news of Monsieur Vignolles, methinks you said. Has he, then, not returned to your quarters?"

"No, my lady," answered the Sieur Giraud, and now he understood the meaning of Tite's nocturnal expedition; it had been to find some trace of Monsieur Vignolles; and he cast aside all further suspicion of this grim old man. "Yet you speak of his returning, my lady. So you knew of his absence?"

"Yes, since he was here just before Marcelle returned," she answered, a slight wave of colour rising to her face.

"Here!" they cried.

"Yes; he followed Petite Maman home from the market-place this noon and watched the house till nightfall. He spoke of the dangers of my remaining here, and I promised to leave the town. He was to await me in the street behind the house, and then we were to search for you, but that was nearly two hours ago. Surely he'd not wait that time; yet had naught

befallen him, he would have come to learn why I did not join him."

As she had grasped what his disappearance might mean, her face had gone ashy white, and she held her hands toward them as though imploring them for their aid.

But the Sieur Giraud was more concerned at the free way she had spoken, and turned on Tite.

"Tite," he said, "you've heard what my lady never would have said before you had she not been so distressed. That you have no hand in whatever trouble has overtaken Monsieur Vignolles, I know full well; but you might be disposed to take a hand in preventing his leaving Dinant. Once for all, let us understand each other. Is it to be above-board between us, or will you use what you have heard against not only Monsieur Vignolles, but the Lady Agathe as well?"

Tite glared doggedly at him and for a moment stood kicking one foot against the other; then he said shortly:

"Could I see Marcelle I'd give you your answer straight enough, for whatever she said would be my work. But if I've to fight it out alone, by my faith I'll set naught in your way, for, myself, I came here thinking chance might have led monsieur hither. Moreover, I've no liking for opposing any lady, save 'tis needful."

The Sieur Giraud made no reply, but seized his hand and gripped it hard. Tite wrenched himself free and turned to the Lady Agathe.

"There is good ground for your fears, my lady," he said bluntly. "By which door did monsieur leave the house?"

"By the garden door, methinks, for 'twas his plan

to engage Petite Maman and the others while I slipped out by the front."

"Ah! Petite Maman!" said the old man quickly. "I hear her voice above the others in the kitchen now. Do you bide here awhile; we shall see what she may know of this affair. Time was when Petite Maman had few secrets from old Tite."

With that he quickly crossed the room and entered the kitchen, closing the door behind him. The burst of welcome that greeted his entrance fell upon the ears of those he left behind.

The Sieur Giraud turned to the Lady Agathe.

"You have heard, my lady, that I am not guilty of all you held against me," he said.

"Yes," she answered; "Monsieur Vignolles made me aware how I had been imposed upon."

In the adjoining room a little, wild-eyed figure suddenly lurched rather than rose to a sitting posture in bed, then, letting its feet to the floor, felt its way along the bedside to the door. None would have seen in this shattered, trembling form that Marcelle who had ruled over a part of the Ardennes. The pallor of weakness and the agony of suffering were stamped heavily upon her face, yet she managed to open the door, and stole softly into the hall, where she laid her ear against the other door.

For as she had lain in that borderland between consciousness and insensibility with the potent effects of the drug fighting against the mad activity of her mind, it had seemed to her that from somewhere *his* voice had reached her ears. In a confused fashion she had tried to reason this away as being impossible, yet her head had roared loudly that it was so, till by main force of will she had resolved to know. When 'twas done, had

one asked how she had come into that hall, she might not have told, yet, half-dazed though she was, her senses were preternaturally acute and on edge.

"Alas, Sieur Giraud," went on the Lady Agathe, little dreaming of this second listener, "what may I say, what may I do to condone my overreadiness to believe such things of you?"

"Speak not of that, my lady, since 'tis now all a part of the past," he answered. "Enough it is and more to know that once again I may enjoy such esteem as your kindness before allowed me."

He knelt, and taking her hand, kissed it very gently, but his kiss had naught in it save the mark of high regard, which any man may pay a lady with never a further thought.

Yet at the sound the kneeling figure without trembled violently, and sought support against the door-frame.

"The evidence of all your senses was against me, my lady," he went on, rising, "and had I been what you deemed me, God knows your action was only what would have become you above all others. It is ended; therefore let us both try to forget what to me at least has been the worst passage of life."

"As it has to me, I do assure you, Sieur Giraud," answered the Lady Agathe gently.

Marcelle could bear no more. It had come in spite of all that she had done—this meeting, this return to what had been before between these two. For in the simple words she had heard she thought to read only the quickening of an oppressed love, and the kiss was to her but the seal they had set thereto. Alas! had her straining gaze but been able to penetrate that thin width of wood before her, her eyes would have given the lie

to such thoughts. Had she but waited another moment her ears would have heard that which would have set her fluttering little heart leaping for joy. But no; she had given up the fight. Defeated, disconsolate, and sick at heart, she rose and staggered back to the bed she had left. She had not been wrong. It had been *his* voice that she had heard. O God!

"Let us then speak of what concerns us now, my lady," said the Sieur Giraud. "You were to meet Monsieur Vignolles in the street behind the house, you say. Yet it appears that you did not go there."

"No," she answered; "for even as I was leaving the house, Marcelle came reeling in upon me."

"And you stayed to care for her, my lady!" he exclaimed. "Methinks ne'er did I hear of nobler deed, for Marcelle had wofully misled you."

"Yet she had saved my life, Sieur Giraud," she answered, "and, withal, methinks I see some reason for the strange course she has taken."

As she said this she looked at him closely, but he merely shook his head as he replied:

"You are discerning, my lady, for, as for myself, I have given o'er trying to know Marcelle's nature. One moment it has the cold, forbidding aspect of a winter's day that chills with its very sight; the next, it is all sunshine and warmth and gladsomeness, that draws one to her with its very glow. At such times one forgets her other side, for then she is not merely good, my lady —not merely pleasing—she is ador——"

The rest of what he would have said was cut off by the hurried entrance of Tite, and by his face they knew that he bore news of moment.

"Come into the hall," he said, leading the way thither. "Faith, the wenches have got liquor from

somewhere, and they're too busy with it to have eye or ear for us, but 'tis best to take no chances."

A burst of hilarity from the kitchen arose to corroborate his statement.

Tite turned to the Sieur Giraud.

"Not far wrong were you in thinking to have seen Crépin Brune," he said, "for 'tis none other than that knave who has made off with monsieur."

The Lady Agathe gasped, and clutched at the door to steady herself.

"They will kill him!" she cried.

"No; 'tis not their game," answered Tite. "What with the liquor they'd had yonder and a little palaver, Petite Maman gave me the whole tale. 'Tis their plan to hold him so that, should the Burgundians take the town, they'll have a hostage for their own safety. Ah, that Crépin is slyer than ten ordinary men! They took monsieur in that very kitchen."

"And where have they taken him?"

"Petite Maman was not sure, but thought 'twas to the house of that Jacques Rochet I had some words with this noon. He lives next door to the inn where we saw him."

"Then the devil seize me if they shall not be upset in their calculations!" cried the Sieur Giraud, and added quickly, "But where go you, Tite?" for the old man had opened the door.

"To arm myself—faith, not with such sword as you wear, for 'twould get between my legs with every step I took. I know where to find such tool as I may swing in comfort. If they've taken monsieur to Rochet's there'll be no small party of them there."

The Lady Agathe took a quick step forward.

"Then you will help release Monsieur Vignolles;

you, Tite?" she asked, and held the old man's look with hers.

"Since 'tis to put a spoke in Crépin's wheel, no fear but that I will, my lady," he answered.

"It means all the world to me, Tite," she said softly, while the Sieur Giraud opened the door and looked up and down the street.

He looked at her sharply.

"We'll do more for knowing that, my lady," he said; and with that the Lady Agathe leaned suddenly forward and, fine lady that she was, seized his rough hand and touched her lips to it, ere he might divine her intention.

A moment he stood rooted to the spot; then rushed from the house.

At the gateway he paused and delivered a brief soliloquy:

"To think of that coming to me at three-score-and-five! By St. Hubert, we shall see, Crépin; we shall see!"

The Sieur Giraud turned to say his adieu and found that the Lady Agathe had opened the other door leading from the hall and was looking within. She turned and laid a finger on her lips.

"It is Marcelle?" he whispered.

She nodded, and then something in the man's face made her beckon him to her.

For an instant he saw the drawn, pallid face and the mass of tumbled, raven locks that fell about it on the pillow. Then the Lady Agathe closed the door softly, for, at last, the leech's herbs had taken effect and Marcelle slept.

Something seemed to be gripping his heart, and his own face reflected some of that haggard look he had seen.

"Poor child! Take all care of her, my lady!" he said hoarsely, and wrung her hand.

Then he ran down the steps, and joining Tite the two set forth hotfoot for the house of Jacques Rochet.

There were few by-ways of Dinant that were unknown to Tite; therefore, it was no very long matter before they stood before the house. The Sieur Giraud was for entering at once; but Tite reminded him that within were probably many they would have to fight, and that he was unarmed, save for the knife at his belt. Bidding the Sieur Giraud await his return, he strode quickly up the street, promising that his absence should be short. Meanwhile, the Sieur Giraud was to watch the house for any sign of life within, and to search about for some means of entrance.

With this latter in view the Sieur Giraud crossed the street and leaped the fence of the adjoining house. Running rapidly around it into the garden behind, he scaled the dividing wall and found himself almost at Rochet's back door. This precaution he had used because of the lights that shone through the windows in front, telling that the inmates were still astir and, perchance, on the alert. He examined the windows carefully and judged that with Tite's help he might force one of them; and then some strange chance led him to the door, and he stopped to test its strength. To his great surprise it flew open under his shoulder, and he was put to it to prevent its crashing against the wall behind. Within all was dark, save for the light that came through the chink of a door at the far end of the passage.

He paused irresolute. Should he go on, or wait for Tite? A moment only he hesitated; then the great longing to see what was on the other side of that door over-

came him and, drawing his sword, he stole silently along the hall, and applied his eye to the crevice.

What he saw wellnigh brought a cry from his lips, for straight in the line of his vision sat Crépin Brune. On a table before him lay Monsieur Vignolles's sword-belt and sheath, and the blade itself Crépin was examining with critical satisfaction under the light of a candle. Though the Sieur Giraud could see no more of the room, he was sure from the silence that Crépin was alone. Nor, in truth, was there any reason why he should fear any meddling with his plans, since he believed there was none who could by chance discover them.

In a flash, all thought of Tite fled from the other, for the sight of this man brought a great rage upon the Sieur Giraud. Softly he felt for the catch of the door, and raising it noiselessly, pushed with his knee till he found the door to give. Then, abandoning all attempt at further stealth, he thrust it open quickly and entered, closing and bolting it behind him.

Crépin sprang to his feet with a sharp cry, and thrust the table before him.

"Another sound like that and 'twill be your last!" said the Sieur Giraud, and shot a glance about the room.

Another door leading to the front hall met his eye, and noting that the bolt was drawn, he quickly crossed the room and shot it home.

"Now, you scurvy rogue, we may speak alone," he said, turning to Crépin. "First drop that sword your clumsy touch is defiling— Ah! Would you?"

He leaped forward, and with a savage lunge ran his blade beneath the one Crépin had thought to use against him. With a jerk of his wrist, it went hurtling to the

floor, and, before the man might move, the Sieur Giraud's point was against his jerkin.

"And pity 'tis that it may not be now," said the Sieur Giraud; "but first, Master Crépin, I have use for you. Where is Monsieur Vignolles, you knave?"

Crépin wilted and sank limply into the chair he had occupied.

"In the cellar," he answered sullenly.

"Is it so?" cried the Sieur Giraud. "Then do you take the candle and we shall soon have him out—and move when I speak to you, lest I run you through first and visit the cellar afterward."

"If I give him up I go free, eh?" whined Crépin, picking up the candle.

"If you give him up 'tis because 'tis forced on you!" cried the Sieur Giraud. "Moreover, you forget our own little account, Master Crépin. If I spared you, I'd hate myself the rest of my life. A few moments more you have, though; so put them to profit. Lead on! You may say such prayers as you know on the way; for 'twill save time later."

With that he drove the cowering wretch ahead of him toward the door through which he had entered.

But even as Crépin laid his hand upon the bolt, loud laughter and the tramp of many steps rang through the passage without. With a mad shriek of joy, Crépin shot back the bolt and, bawling lustily for aid, dodged nimbly to one side ere the Sieur Giraud recovered from his surprise.

But his joy was premature, for, with a bound, the Sieur Giraud sprang upon him and, keeping his blade toward the door, caught him with one hand by the neck and dashed his head against the wall with awful force. He sank in a huddled heap; but his work had not been

futile, for even as he fell the others came pouring through the door. They had left Crépin but a half-hour before to go to the inn for drink.

A half dozen sturdy rogues they were, two wearing swords and the rest armed with clubs and knives. Jacques Rochet himself was at their head.

"Ha!" he roared, "the other Burgundian as I live; the same that was with Tite this day at the inn, and I knew him not! By God, Tite shall pay for the company he keeps! Lay at him, comrades!"

But the Sieur Giraud had no intention of being butchered by these thieves; nor did he wait for their onset. Snatching up the chair, he hurled it full at Rochet's head and was rejoiced to see the blood come streaming from his mark. Yet he paused not, but following up his lead, set upon the man nearest him and ran him through ere the fool could raise his sword. But here misfortune overtook him, for the man in falling twisted the hilt from his grasp ere he might withdraw the blade. Monsieur Vignolles's sword had dropped just beyond his reach, and with a maddened cry the five sprang at him.

But their prey was not yet within their grasp. With a bound, the Sieur Giraud caught up the table and brought it down upon the heads of the foremost, and, as he did so, the candle rolled to the floor and was promptly stamped out by some foot. Then cautiously and silently he worked his way to the wall and along it to the door leading to the front hall. A moment more and he would have been without; but even as he softly drew the bolt, the outer door giving upon the street fell inward with a crash, and he heard heavy steps approaching through the hall.

Caught between two bodies of these knaves, what

chance had he now? Despite the man's dogged courage, his heart fell.

But even as he despaired, he heard his own name shouted aloud.

The saints be praised! This new-comer was Tite!

Flinging open the door, he fairly ran into the old man.

"Tite, thank God, 'tis you!" he cried.

"Come quick! The whole street will be on us in a moment with this noise. What devil possessed you to enter alone?" said Tite.

"But Monsieur Vignolles!" cried the Sieur Giraud.

"He must wait," answered Tite. "We have enough to look after our own skins now."

And, indeed, he was right, for were they caught by the crowd that would soon gather, it would mean the end of everything.

"Yet, by my faith, I'll not leave my sword behind! 'Tis yonder, stuck in the carcass of one of those curs," cried the Sieur Giraud. "Give me then for a moment that——"

"Nay," answered Tite; and for an instant the light of battle was in his eyes. "I know as much of the use of this as you do. Follow me, and you shall have your sword."

The five within had by now fathomed the nature of the interruption and, seeing that Tite was alone, rushed madly forward toward them.

Then did Tite seem to shake off his years.

With a cry of joy he leaped well into the room, that his strange weapon might have fair play, and fell upon them. Nor could they withstand his onslaught, for few there are who may stand before it. It was but a stout shaft of oak the length of his arm, to which, by a chain

of equal length, was hung a huge oaken ball bristling with iron spikes. The holy-water sprinkler, they called it, in jest, for it somewhat resembled that implement in shape, and death it was to him whom it touched when wielded by such arms as Tite's.

Three more were down when the Sieur Giraud recovered his sword, and then the two turned and ran through the hall and down the street. Nor were they any too soon, for the street was now alive with those roused by the brawl, and one party even set out in pursuit of them.

It was owing to Tite's extensive knowledge of the by-ways and alleys that they finally were enabled to shake them off.

Yet even as they entered Madame Vaucler's door, neither felt too great a confidence in the future. As for the Sieur Giraud, he knew that from that hour these rogues, and especially Crépin, would spare no pains in hunting him down, while Tite had food for reflection in that he had this night allied himself with the Burgundian faction.

How long they might hope to avoid discovery seemed to depend wholly upon the extent of Crépin's hurt. It was therefore scarce a matter for wonder that both should pray that this might prove mortal.

CHAPTER XIX

FROM OUT THE HAZE

NO idle words had Monsieur Vignolles spoken when he had forecast the threatening doom that hovered over the town.

Like the coils of a serpent the great, advancing columns of the Count de Charolais unwound themselves from among the hills to the northward. In the van marched the archers, thousand on thousand of them, under the watchful eye of the Count de St. Pol, Constable of France. Behind them the earth shook with the passage of the huge bombards which were to batter down the walls of Dinant, and on the flanks hung thick masses of mounted men-at-arms.

From across the river at Bouvignes, whither Monseigneur the Duke of Burgundy had gone to watch the course of affairs, the spectacle of this advancing host was imposing enough. He smiled grimly as he looked on, for in those flashing gleams from headpiece or lance, in the flaunt of those flaming banners, revenge seemed very near, revenge upon this *canaille* who had dared defy his house. A great pride swelled within him, too, as his eye caught the sable banner with its golden effigy of St. George dealing the death-stroke to the dragon, for he knew that beneath its fluttering folds rode one of his own blood, one well fitted for his task of vengeance. If Monseigneur's spirit was wellnigh cold with age, his heart warmed nevertheless at the thought that he had

such son as the Count de Charolais to perform this work upon which he himself could not venture.

Two days after the affray at the house of Jacques Rochet, an uncouth, unwieldy rabble sallied forth from the town to meet this trained soldiery. For in Dinant the hot-heads still were in full control and large bodies of the Companions had come in from the hills to have a hand in the undoing of the hated Charlotel. Scarce half a league from the gates the two forces met, the one cool, compact, and directed by such a man of war as the constable; the other, turbulent and bawling the vilest insults by way of preliminary, with no formation, and led by outlaw chiefs to whom warfare, save in the marauding fashion of the hills, was unknown. The issue of such an encounter could not remain long in doubt. Of the two thousand who had ventured forth with such foolhardy zeal, scarce half returned within the walls.

And now, in place of the vaunted courage and the boasting threats against Charlotel, came terror-stricken cries from this riotous mob. If the advance guard alone of the Burgundian army could deal such a blow, what havoc would the main force inflict? Better far to return to the hardships of the hills than to remain here to become such prey. So thought many of them, and accordingly fled with no more ado; but enough of them were yet left to hold the upper hand.

On the afternoon of the same day the Burgundian host deployed under the very walls of the town and planted their bombards to bear upon one spot in the masonry. A formal summons to yield was met with jeering refusal from the maddened crowds on the walls.

Then the Count de Charolais gave the signal and in an instant the ground shook with the thunderous discharge of many pieces. The very bombards themselves,

being provided with no trunnions, leaped high after each firing and tore great gashes in the earth beneath them. Great solid shot smashed against the walls, or came screaming over them to fall in the town.

Against all this the wretched rabble could return only a wavering fire; but the man Lenoir had spoken with reason in regard to the walls. Some hammering they would require ere they yielded, and with this thought the crowd contented itself, always deluded by the belief that the king or the Liègeoise were coming to their aid. To storm the town before a breach had been effected was beyond the powers of even the Burgundians. Therefore they settled down and directed all their attention to the guns.

From dawn till darkness set in each day for a week the surrounding hills echoed with the continuous roar, and slowly, but steadily, the stout masonry gave way under the onslaught. Within the town great jagged holes in the tiled and leaden roofs bore witness to the havoc wrought, and nigh to a thousand met death in the streets or perchance in their own homes.

And now, in truth, sheer panic seized upon the very ones who before had blustered such defiance. Escape ere the Burgundians came through that breach—a score paces wide—which had been torn in the wall, was all that possessed their minds. By the strange fortune which ofttimes favours rogues, the river above the town had been left unguarded. Discovery of this was made by a few more venturesome spirits, and with the fall of night these bold defenders stole away into the darkness and the safety of the Ardennes.

With the morning the magistrates again found themselves in control and at once made overtures to the Count de Charolais. These were unanswered, for, with the

prize well in his grasp, Count Charles was in no mood for treating with his victims.

Fearful of showing themselves in the streets, the Sieur Giraud and Tite all this time had been forced to remain indoors by day. But at night they thrice had ventured forth, searching the deepest shadows in the manner of two culprits, for too many now had heard of them, and recognition meant death.

On each occasion they had visited the street wherein was the widow Galiot's house, but had been unable to catch sight of any within, nor dared they enter, since it had been shown them how thick the women were with Crépin.

Once they had nearly met misfortune, for one of the armed patrols which now nightly held ward over the streets, would have inquired into the affair which brought them abroad when others were only too glad to sleep during the lull in the bombardment. Flight alone had saved them, and again it had been Tite who showed the way to safety.

What fate Monsieur Vignolles had met they knew not, nor might they further concern themselves for him since their own position was wellnigh as perilous. Poncet had never returned to them, and the reason was clear, when Madame Vaucler learned in her gossip that his head had been taken off by a round shot.

Of Crépin they heard no word, and the Sieur Giraud wondered whether the blow he had dealt him had, for all time, put an end to the rogue's devilry.

Nobly had Madame Vaucler met their appeal for secrecy with regard to their presence in her house. Tite had been for locking her up in her own room, swearing that no woman's tongue might be trusted; but the Sieur Giraud had overruled this after a talk with the woman.

Garrulous as she might be, she could not do too much for those who had been comrades of her son, and, moreover, she knew naught of the reason which made these two so fearful. They had said some brawl had forced this concealment upon them, and she once had seen something of the like in the case of André himself.

Yet the thought of the Lady Agathe and Marcelle being left alone during all this turmoil weighed heavily on both the Sieur Giraud and Tite. At length they decided upon a plan for their relief, and only waited for favourable opportunity to put it into effect.

Among the terror-stricken herd which poured forth into the hills, some who might have been looked for there were lacking. Neither the burly form of Jacques Rochet nor the lesser one of Crépin Brune fought for place in that mad rout. In the case of the former this was due to his very great confidence in Crépin, while with the latter, it only went to show the supreme confidence he felt in his own safety, even should the Burgundians take the town. Therefore the two, with some half-score knaves whom they cajoled with promises of future reward, remained behind, and Rochet's house became the headquarters for the party.

In truth, the blow that Crépin's head had sustained had been no light one, and for some days he might not leave the bed to which they had borne him. This had served to protect the Sieur Giraud from the immediate pursuit Crépin would have begun. Indeed, the man had urged Rochet to the work, but the efforts of that worthy had met with no success.

With his recovery, his hatred for the Sieur Giraud grew apace, and consumed him to the exclusion of all other thought. Only let him lay hands on this Burgundian now, and he could wipe out the score between

them and add to his own reward at one and the same time.

On the evening of the day that saw the return of the magistrates to power, Crépin found himself strong enough to rise and dress. Fixity of purpose was on his features, for in the long hours he had lain helpless his mind had not been idle. An ugly, distorted look he wore, for despite flogging and such other tortures as they could invent, Monsieur Vignolles had, for the third time, just refused to disclose the lodging of the Sieur Giraud. Which tale, repeated by Rochet, had served to bring Crépin from his bed.

"Then there is but one course left us," he cried as he snatched a pike from the corner. "We must search the town from end to end. But first I will see Petite Maman, for perchance she has some word that may help us. Leave three men to have an eye on that fool below, and you and the rest come with me. By all the saints, this Sieur Giraud shall not give us the slip this time if fortune favours us!"

A moment later he gazed with satisfaction on the men Rochet assembled, and, noting that they were well armed, strode forth into the night with the eight at his heels.

Arrived before the widow Gailot's, he left them before the house, bidding them keep in the shadow, and quickly made his way round to the rear.

He had come in good season, for Petite Maman was just in the act of putting up the shutters before the window. She started, half in fright, as he came before her.

"Faith, 'tis little we've seen of you of late, Master Crépin," she cried. "Methought one of the big shot must have carried you off, and with you I saw depart

the hope you raised within me the night you took young jackanapes from here. How fares he?"

"Well enough," answered Crépin shortly, and nodded to the other women who now came to the window. "But stubborn he is—stubborn as the very devil—and naught will he say of the whereabouts of the other. 'Tis for that I come to you, for 'tis clear enough you know something, since but a week ago the Sieur Giraud wellnigh did for me."

"And what has that to do with me?" asked the woman.

"Enough, methinks," he replied, "since the man would scarce find me out by chance—he and that old rogue Tite."

Petite Maman let the shutter drop heavily.

"Tite, you say? He was with the Burgundian?" she cried. "Then, in truth, 'twas I who sent them against you. We'd all had some drink that night; but, by my faith, ne'er did I suspect Tite of favouring this Sieur Giraud, else would I have kept my tongue still."

"And better 'twould have been," growled Crépin; "but the thing is ended. What I would learn now is whether you know aught of where the two keep themselves, for, I tell you, to lay hands on the Sieur Giraud will mean much to us. The time is getting short, and Charlotel may storm the town at any hour."

"Ay, but I know naught of what you ask," answered the woman, and then added, "To think of my being so wheedled by Tite! But 'twas drink did it—drink and the fluster of Marcelle's coming that night and in such case."

"What mean you, woman? Why should her coming make you play the fool?"

"Because, till the leech came, we all thought she

was as good as dead," replied Petite Maman. "Some one in the hills dealt her a foul blow that wellnigh made an end of her."

"The devil! I knew naught of that!" said Crépin, and, like a flash, a brutal desire arose within him to see Marcelle and note how she would receive him after what had passed between them at the vine-grower's.

"Methinks I'll see Marcelle a moment!" he exclaimed.

"And methinks you'll do naught of the kind," answered Petite Maman firmly. "Faith, 'tis only to-day she has sat up for the first time, and that, I'll be sworn, is only due to the care she's had from the fine lady she sent here."

"The Lady Agathe!" said Crépin.

"Whom else should it be?" answered the woman. "Saints! she's scarce left Marcelle's side since she came here. A strange lady she is, and one the like of whom I've ne'er seen before."

The woman's refusal to allow him to see Marcelle only served to aggravate his desire. If his plans did not miscarry, the time might soon come when he would be in a position to drive a fresh bargain with Marcelle—a bargain in which she would have no say.

"I tell you I will see Marcelle," he said sharply; "and do you have a care how you oppose me, Petite Maman! No more deal you with Crépin Brune of the Ardennes, but with the man who may save your very life yet."

The women recoiled in dread at his words.

"Ha! You women will be looking for a friend when the Burgundians get into these streets. You know what to expect unless——"

"Hold your tongue!" cried Petite Maman. "Faith,

we've no notion of opposing you since you say you can save us."

"That I swear to do!" he said. "If Charlotel deny me aught after what I shall offer him, then has the devil turned all things awry. Saints! one might have thought I meant the girl harm! What more natural than for an old Companion to wish to see her after her trouble?"

"Enough! Since 'tis fixed in your mind, see her you shall, though methinks she scarce yearns so for the meeting, and she has said no word to any one since she came back from the hills," answered Petite Maman, and, moving to one side, added, "Come in, then; you'll find them in the front room."

"Them!" cried Crépin. "But I've no time to waste on this other; I would see Marcelle alone. Get the Lady Agathe away from her."

"She's not with Marcelle, but in her own room, asleep," put in Bonne Fleuron. "I saw her there just before you came."

"Then do you go to the front door and I'll let you in," said Petite Maman, "though 'tis a trick I'd have no hand in but for what you say you can do for us."

"And I'll not forget when it comes your turn to ask favours," he said quickly, and with that stole round to the front and entered.

Petite Maman softly opened the door of Marcelle's room, looked about, and then, without a word, motioned him to pass in. An instant later the door closed softly behind him.

So quietly had the man entered that Marcelle, half turned from him, made no note of his presence, and he paused a moment, struck by the great change that her illness had wrought in her appearance. She half sat, half reclined in a large arm-chair spread with blankets

and pillows from the bed. In the light of the candle upon the table, her face shone white and drawn; but Crépin's mind was most taken up with the listless look in her great black eyes as she stared straight before her. In it were concentrated abandonment, despair, and resignation. Her small hands clasped and unclasped again and again as he watched, and, wretch though the man was, he felt something akin to pity for her.

The Lady Agathe might have told him how for days she had struggled to bring Marcelle back to the present; how she had fought by every means to rouse her from her somnolence, even to mention of the Sieur Giraud's name, and all without avail. Also how Marcelle had checked her petulantly when she would have told her of the great love she bore Monsieur Vignolles; so that at last she had given over all thought of speech, and had realised that she, at least, might not rouse Marcelle from her lethargy.

He shifted his feet uneasily and coughed.

Marcelle turned her head slowly.

"Oh, it's you, is it, Crépin?" she said quietly, and seemed in no way startled by his appearance.

This form of greeting took him unawares. He had been armed against a wild outburst of passion, but this indifferent calm robbed him of speech.

"So you got free that day under the Great Bald Knoll? I knew it not before," she went on, but in her words there was no tone of interest. It was as though she spoke of some trivial occurrence which mattered not one way or the other, and broke not upon her reverie. Yet she had not spoken as much since her injury.

At last the man found his voice.

"Ay, I slipped through their hands in the end," he

said, "though the feel of the rope is upon my neck even now."

She made no answer, and he continued:

"That day you entered into a compact with me; do you recall it, Marcelle? If I had succeeded——"

"But you failed," she said wearily. "Why, then, speak of something which no longer has any interest for me?"

He stepped forward so that he came to face her.

"And if it is so, think not that my own concern is so short-lived, Marcelle," he cried sharply, for in the very frailty of the girl his brutal instinct thought to see a ready submission, or, at most, but a feeble resistance to his will.

"Ha, times have changed, Marcelle!" he went on. "You will remember I spoke of the fame I should attain if my shaft went true; but, bah! What would such have meant?—naught but the plaudits of a roving troop of vagabonds, the fawning of the precious Companions of the Green Tent! Where are these now? Skulking yonder in the Ardennes, and dodging every shadow, fearful lest it be cast by a man of Burgundy. I failed that day because of a rotten bow-string, yet ne'er did good fortune attend closer upon failure."

She stopped him with a gesture of fatigue, and raised her great eyes to his for a moment.

"I know your change of purpose," she said quietly. "Agathe has told me—I believe she has—I am not sure—of the seizure of Monsieur Vignolles, and with the Count de Charolais thundering at the gates, your intent is clear enough. But, once more, I tell you, all this affects me no longer. When the Burgundians come pouring into the town, they shall find me ready. Yet, I shall pay the debt of another, for that Marcelle the

Mad whom they would kill died a week ago. But go, Crépin. I would be alone."

The Lady Agathe would have marvelled had she seen her so wakened.

A moment he looked at her without speaking, so strange were her words; then shook his head and said, with what passed with him for gentleness:

"Faith, that blow on the head has shaken your mind, Marcelle. Or is it the dread of the death you think to see before you? Ay, 'tis that, methinks, for few there be who can look such in the face and hold their senses. You have guessed aright what's in my mind. The man's a fool who sits idly by when he may gain reward with little effort, and this Vignolles will make a pretty offering to the Burgundians. But 'tis the other, the Sieur Giraud, they'd give more to hold, and him I will have ere many hours. Could I have taken Gaspard Lenoir the other night, the bag would have been complete, but he's got safe away."

Marcelle looked up quickly.

"Then you know where to lay your hand on the Sieur Giraud?" she asked.

"No," he answered grimly; "but if I track him not to his cover this night, 'twill be passing strange. Two such men as he and Tite may not remain hid to all eyes in such town as Dinant; and eight sturdy knaves there are without who will aid me in the search. But enough of this; 'tis of yourself I would speak."

He thrust his head quite close to hers, but she showed no fear, though a repulsive leer had come over his features.

"Such fair body as yours was ne'er meant for the rope or block, Marcelle," he said, "nor shall it meet such end. Yet, in truth, I saw not how 'twas to be avoided

till your own words—mad though they were—gave me the clew. Even I, with the power I hope to gain, might not claim the life of Marcelle the Mad. But you have said that she was dead. So be it; let it be thought so. For a week you've not been seen abroad, and enough women have already been killed to make it no strange matter. Petite Maman and the others will swear to the lie to save you and to oblige me. In two days' time all in Dinant will believe the tale, for we'll take care to spread the news far and wide."

"While I remain alive to prove its untruth," said Marcelle coldly. "Oh, leave me, Crépin; I have no mind for what you say!"

"Yet you shall hear me," he answered fiercely. "Think you I am so mad as to suggest your remaining here as you are? No! That the report we spread may receive credence, you shall disappear as completely as though, in truth, you were dead. This night shall you leave here and go to the house of Jacques Rochet. The Burgundians will not search there; I'll swear to that; and if I may not save Marcelle the Mad they will scarce deny me the life of a common wench, such as Rochet's sister, for example."

Under his words she had surely been shaking off her stupor, and with the change her old horror of the man possessed her. He had touched the only chord, perchance, that could so have roused her, and would now find that his conquest was not to be so light a matter.

"And the price for this great service is the same as you before exacted?" she asked.

In his eagerness the man took no note of her tone, which should have warned him of trouble ahead.

"What else should it be?" he said. "If I give you life, 'tis that I may enjoy it with you. Long have I

sought some return of the love I bear you, Marcelle; and I make you fair enough offer. From to-night you become mine, body and soul—mine to do with as I choose—or else you shall have such mercy as the Burgundian shall award you. If my arms may not embrace you, then it shall be the rasping coil of the noose. Choose!"

She rose and faced him, and he paused even as his hand would have fallen upon her; paused with sudden surprise at the new light in her eye.

"Fiend though you are, thank God that you came to me this night," she cried, "for the very brute in you has snatched me from the horrid depths to which I had come! You offer me life as though 'twas something for which I craved. Fool, you know not that this very moment should death come upon me I would welcome it gladly, and if I have understood not how to live, I shall know how to die. Go, Crépin Brune, go to the vile business that calls you forth. Naught may I put in your way, for the race of Marcelle is run and none are left to answer her wishes. Your own miserable life you would save by sacrificing two men whom you ne'er would risk meeting in fair fight. But, ah! go, go! For the very sight of your scurvy face fills me with loathing!"

In truth, the man's expression was such as to turn one from it, and for a moment so choking was his rage that he might not speak; then it burst from him in a flood.

"Then so be it!" he roared. "Since you prefer this death, by God! you shall have it; but first you shall know what it is to oppose me now! You spurn the offer I made you, as though we were still in the hills and you had choice. Ha! We shall see! This night shall you go to Rochet's house, willing or no, and there we shall find a way to tame you, methinks."

He took a step toward the door, but even as his hand would have fallen on the catch, it opened and the Lady Agathe faced him.

High above her head she bore a heavy brass candlestick, the candle still burning in its socket, and ere Crépin divined her intention she hurled it full at his head. He instinctively ducked and the flying metal missed him by the merest fraction.

Marcelle looked on dumfounded by this sudden onslaught. She had believed the Lady Agathe incapable of raising a hand, even in her own defence; but now in her blue eyes there was a glitter that for a moment made Crépin recoil.

The next instant she was at Marcelle's side and her arm had encircled the slight form.

"I have heard, dear heart," she cried; "but he shall not do it! God will not let it be so!"

Crépin crossed the room and stamped out the light of the fallen candle.

"Ha!" he sneered. "It seems, my fine lady, that you have learned something of fury in the Ardennes. A little more and methinks you would have put out my light. I search no quarrel with you; but do you keep your hands off my affairs, or——"

Ere he might assign the penalty a loud shouting arose without; then the scuffling of feet upon the gravel path, and the sharp clash of steel.

Crépin ran to the door and threw it open, and, as he did so, the Sieur Giraud staggered up the steps as though to seek asylum within. They all saw him plainly in the light, yet 'tis doubtful if he saw as clearly, for blood was pouring into his eyes from a gash in his forehead. The next instant two figures leaped upon him from behind and threw him heavily backward.

Even as he fell, Jacques Rochet ran up the steps.

"Faith, 'tis like the chase itself!" he cried. "You'll get as much game by letting it come to you as by seeking it. The fools ran straight into our arms; but curse them, two of our men are down!"

A groan from the pathway bore witness to this statement.

"But the other, the old man Tite?" cried Crépin.

"The devil seize him; he got clean away when we came between the two!" answered Rochet.

"Well, 'tis small matter, for 'tis this Sieur Giraud we want most," said Crépin in high spirits. "See that he gives you not the slip."

"Never fear," was the reply. "The fight's out of him for a while, and he'll not get out from under the four that hold him now."

They both peered into the darkness and laughed. Then Crépin turned upon the women.

"Methinks we've robbed you of a call," he sneered, "for I know not what else should have brought them here so opportunely. For a short time I must leave you to see that the Sieur Giraud is housed as becomes his station; but within an hour I shall be back. Lest you quit the house, I'll leave two men here—and, Marcelle, do you gather such things as you need, for at my friend Rochet's you shall sleep this night."

With a coarse laugh he slammed the door behind him, and the two women, listening, heard the party stumbling about the grounds for some moments; heard the measured tread of footsteps as they moved away, and then all was still, save for the crunching of gravel beneath the feet of the man left before the house.

"O God! Is there no way out?" cried the Lady Agathe.

"None!" answered Marcelle as she turned and entered her room. "Yet I shall not go to Rochet's house, Agathe."

She stooped, and from beneath her pillow drew forth a knife in its leather sheath.

"I shall know how to use it, fear not, Agathe," she said. "God knows, I have meditated such use often enough in these past few days!"

"Oh, no, no, Marcelle!" cried the other. "Yet—yet better that than this thing that threatens you."

"Yes," answered Marcelle simply.

And so they waited in silence, starting at every sound without; but of the two, the hand of Marcelle was the steadier, and her eye was clear with resolution.

For hours, it seemed, they sat there huddled in each other's arms; yet, in truth, it was less than the half of one. Then suddenly there came the sound of scratching upon the door.

"Marcelle! My lady! Let me in!"

It was but a hoarse whisper, but it brought them to their feet with a bound, for, praise God! it was the voice of Tite plain enough. A second later he stood before them.

"By St. Hubert, a fine mess we've made of it this night!" he cried. "But come; 'tis left for me to do what the two of us set out for, not an hour since, and there's no time to lose. We've got gold—or I have now—no matter how we had it. Ask no man if he's a thief in Dinant to-night. The magistrates have sent the keys of the town to the Count de Charolais and the gates are open. We may buy the right to leave Dinant if we move quickly and before any of my lords come up, for the archers of Burgundy have the same love of

gold as the rest of us. Come! They have not yet entered the citadel, and 'tis a fair chance."

"Oh, thank God!" cried the Lady Agathe. "Come, Marcelle! But what of the guard before the house?" she added, turning to Tite.

"He'll not detain you," he replied grimly, and half drew his knife so that they saw the red upon it.

"Then come, Marcelle, come!" cried the Lady Agathe with a shudder.

But Marcelle made no move.

"No, I shall not leave Dinant," she said, "for now my work is clear before me."

"Not leave Dinant?" cried Tite.

"No, I shall stay for what I have to do," she answered quietly. "Something seems to have been lifted from my head and I have come from out the haze wherein I dreamt. Yet I must fly from here, or—or Crépin will return to seize me. Tite, Tite, take me from here—somewhere, anywhere. 'Tis the last favour Marcelle e'er will ask of you."

She clutched his hand distractedly.

A moment the old man hesitated, dumfounded by her words; then he shrugged his shoulders.

"A long time has your will been mine, Marcelle," he said, "too long to suffer change now. It shall be as you wish, though the devil only knows what possesses you. Come, then; I will take you to Madame Vaucler's. If her house hides you as well as it has the Sieur Giraud and me, 'twill serve your needs."

Thus did Tite thrust behind him the hopes of escape which he, as much as any, had cause to cherish, and the Lady Agathe said no further word.

"God bless you, Tite!" cried Marcelle, and wrung his hand.

The next moment the three stole silently into the street, so silently that the guard at the rear took no alarm.

Yet it was a full hour ere they reached Madame Vaucler's, for Tite would proceed only when they had clear field, and ofttimes made them halt in some shadow till he was satisfied of this.

As they mounted the steps a gun thundered heavily from the plain.

The Marshal of Burgundy had entered the citadel.

Adieu now all thought of escape!

CHAPTER XX

A BREAK IN THE LINES

THUS, without a final struggle with the Burgundian host; without forcing upon them the storming of those walls which had been so battered to their foundations, did the people of Dinant throw themselves upon the mercy of their foe.

Mercy! They would soon see how such was meted out to them. The mischief had been done. The wanton, riotous mob had fled, bequeathing to those they left behind the terrible legacy of settlement with the House of Burgundy. Leagues away in the fastnesses of the Ardennes skulked these outlaw bands, straining their gaze from the hilltops to note the outcome of the ruin they had wrought, and ready to return should the wretched inhabitants make their peace.

Alas, for those left with such a debt to meet! Better they might have laid down their lives in their own streets in strife with these renegades than so to have incurred the hatred of the Duke of Burgundy and that last grim and towering figure of the Dark Ages, the Count de Charolais.

Yet now, with the prey well within his toils, Count Charles moved in a slow and deliberate fashion that accorded well with his cold-blooded intent. Moreover, Monseigneur had arrived from Bouvignes, and their two heads were often together, for there was much detail to be gone over in the design they meditated.

For two days then, save for the advance guard which Count Charles had thrown into the citadel, no Burgundians entered within the gates. Yet with these first comers the townspeople had a foretaste of what lay before them, for scarce had midnight sounded when they broke from control and poured through the streets in search of spoil. From that moment, by night and by day, no man's house was free from their raids, and the streets they held to themselves, for none would venture abroad in the swaggering throng, dreading the sharp prod of a sword or the playful lance-thrust which always attended the meeting of Burgundian and man of Dinant.

To this search for plunder Count Charles made no scruple; but for offences against the women of the town his rage knew no bounds. Three archers of his own guard found guilty of such wrong were hung before the very houses they had entered, their chains clanking ominous warning to any others so disposed.

On the third day after the surrender of the town, Monseigneur again betook himself to Bouvignes. The plan had been determined to the smallest item, and its execution he confidently left to his son. Moreover, shaken with age and illness, he had no mind for too close contact with what was to follow.

Far over the plain, before the gates, extended the Burgundian forces. Each day the van had moved a little nearer, and now, with the departure of Monseigneur, the blare of trumpets called them to arms.

The morning was bright and clear and the summer sun danced gaily from helm to breastplate, and from lance-head to pike, as the vast concourse took up its march toward the gates. From their platforms the huge, brazen bombards grinned open-mouthed at the spectacle, yet shone as with a dull reddened resentment that the

monstrous breach they had effected was not to be turned to account.

In the van of the advancing troops, as they entered the gates, rode the Count de St. Pol in the midst of a resplendent staff. Behind him, rank on rank, marched masses of light-footed archers, their brilliant tunics and plumed caps a sea of nodding colour, and their lusty voices roaring forth song that alike drowned drum and trumpet.

Following these cavorted a gleaming cavalcade beneath a waving surge of banners emblazoned with the emblems of the states owning allegiance to the House of Burgundy. And what a host of these there were; to what far-away districts had this summons of fire and sword penetrated, and there been obeyed! Brabant, Limbourg, Luxembourg, Flanders, Artois—these would have been looked for in any Burgundian muster; but, in truth, Count Charles had meant no half measures, for mingling their folds with these fluttered the standards of Hainault, Holland, Zealand, Namur, Friesland, and Malines. And in the centre, towering above them all, reared the dreaded oriflamme of the House of Burgundy.

Close behind, with his eyes fixed on this token of his lineage, rode the Count de Charolais. The cowering people who now had ventured forth could read no sign of his intent in his cold, implacable look. Over his armour fell a heavy mantle, its velvet folds flashing with gems and weighted down with the great golden Cross of St. Andrew that gleamed upon its front. Beside his massive frame those who rode with him were lost sight of, for it was he, and he alone, who held the fate of these people in his hand.

Bringing up the rear came the nobles and pages of the household, and then squadron after squadron of

men-at-arms, till the earth trembled with the tread of their mounts, and the ear hummed with the clash of steel and the jingle of spur.

As the last file passed, the great gates swung heavily to behind them. For Dinant the hour of retribution had come.

And now every house in Dinant had its quota of these invaders to shelter, and plunder was renewed with tenfold force. As for the Count de Charolais, never for one moment did he lose sight of the terrible oath he had sworn against this town and the awful end he had in view.

The chief men of Dinant waited upon him with prayerful, frenzied appeal for clemency. His answer was to order them bound together and cast into the Meuse, and in the day following his entrance wellnigh a thousand shrieking wretches had gone to follow them.

Reward without stint he promised for the capture of Gaspard Lenoir, freely offering a hundred lives in exchange, and no house escaped his search. Yet, desperate and willing as they were, the people might only shake their heads and point to the hills. The man had been driven from the town and only the Ardennes wood might give him up. Chagrin at failure to lay hands on this culprit served to spur Count Charles on to the consummation of his task.

Such little order as he had maintained he now abandoned. The right of the men to plunder was granted or overlooked, but never did he relax his interdict for the protection of the women. Amid all the scenes of carnage and desolation they were as secure from injury as though the Burgundians never had entered the town. But no man escaped his vengeance. With each one a price was set. If it was forthcoming he was driven to

the gates and allowed to depart; if not, he was taken to the market-place and sold into slavery to the highest bidder. For a crown four of these miserable beings could be bought by one who watched the market closely.

And then, two days after his entrance, Count Charles issued his last proclamation. Dinant was to disappear from the face of the earth; walls, towers, houses, churches, not one of these should be left standing, but stone by stone levelled to the ground and the fragments borne away. Never again would defiance and insult to his house come from Dinant.

The women and children would be allowed to seek such asylum as they might find in Liège, and should have fit escort thither. The men should follow their new masters into slavery. Husband should be torn from wife, father from children, and all scattered abroad over the land, living examples of the folly they had committed.

One heart-rending wail arose from the stricken people as they listened to the heralds' pronouncement of this. God knows what such a fate meant for most of these women driven from home without friend or any who might do aught for them!

The piteous cry arose to the room in the town-hall where Count Charles sat in conference with the constable; but not by one muscle did his stern features change. An aide placed a parchment before him, and, glancing it over, he rapidly scrawled his name thereto. It was an order directing the assembly of the women and their departure that very afternoon at the hour of four.

In the gloom of Rochet's cellar, chained to opposite sides of the wall, one might have thought the Sieur Giraud and Monsieur Vignolles in sad position to learn aught of all this. Yet only one would have thought so

who knew not the nature of Crépin Brune. To leave these two to their own reflections or such talk as they might find was to make too great a sacrifice of pleasure, and the man could no sooner have refrained from taunting them with their approaching end than he could have done an honest deed. Therefore he had taken care to keep them well informed of the progress of affairs.

He had sought audience with Count Charles on the day of his entrance, but in the stress of other matters the count had had no mind for him.

A half-score Burgundian troopers had been quartered upon Rochet, and he had been for turning the prisoners over to them. But Crépin would hear naught of it and imposed secrecy on his followers, for he had no mind to lose any part of the credit and reward he saw before him. By his direction the Burgundians were received with open arms, and with plentiful supplies of liquor kept in good humour. Nor had these men any thought of plunder, for Crépin, Rochet, and the rest were little short of vagabonds who lived from hand to mouth. Therefore they never thought of searching the house, as otherwise they would have done. Often the noise of their carousals penetrated to the cellar.

One thing alone was of some solace to the two in their cheerless prison, and that was the knowledge that whatever else might have overtaken the Lady Agathe and Marcelle, at all events Crépin knew naught of them. Else they made no doubt he scarce would have refrained from mentioning it as something with which still further to harry them.

On the day set for the departure of the women Crépin had omitted his usual visit to them. At noon one of the men had entered and thrust a loaf and some

water within reach of them and then taken himself off without a word.

The house had become strangely silent as the afternoon wore on, and they were idly speculating as to the cause when suddenly there came a loud tramping of feet overhead, and, a moment later, the rickety stairs leading to the cellar groaned with the descent of a body of men. The heavy bars before the door fell with a clatter and the light of a lantern streamed within.

This latter swung from the arm of Crépin, and behind him came Captain Chaubran and a dozen archers of the guard.

"There, captain, is your game," said Crépin gleefully, extending the lantern so that its rays first fell upon the Sieur Giraud, then on Monsieur Vignolles.

"Saints! the pen is close enough!" cried Chaubran, and sniffed the air with much disrelish, then turned to the Sieur Giraud, "Ha, we meet again, it seems, Sieur Giraud! Last time you wellnigh did for me yonder in the hills; but I've no license to square matters. You both go to settle your account with one who outranks me."

Neither made any reply. Too often had they looked forward to this hour—spoken hopelessly of it—to have any mind for this fool's words.

"Strike off their irons!" went on Chaubran, seeing that they paid no heed, and some of the men fell to cutting the rivets that bound them.

But Crépin's joy permitted no quiet.

"Remember the lash—remember the lash I had the first day you came to the camp," he sneered at the Sieur Giraud. "Ha! I told you I'd ne'er forget those welts. Perchance, also, you'll have mind for that night above-stairs when you wellnigh did for me, even as the captain says you served him. But times are changed, eh? I

have seen, I have talked with Charl—with the Count de Charolais, and this is my hour!"

"The devil choke you with your own tongue!" cried Chaubran. "The man has enough to face without your gibing!" and, turning to the other, "Saints! think not I hold such spite myself, Sieur Giraud, for, by my faith, were matters different, we'd settle our affair above-board and with the sword, not with such ill-natured ranting as this dog does utter!"

"I thank you, captain," answered the Sieur Giraud, as his irons fell from him, "but methinks we shall scarce have opportunity for the sport you suggest. You come to take us before my lord count, I make no doubt. Let us then be on our way."

"Ay, captain," joined in Monsieur Vignolles, "and thank God for the sight of an honest face again and the chance of a breath of air from heaven. Lead on!"

Chaubran looked hard into their faces and shook his head as though the task were little to his taste, then gave the order to withdraw. Slowly the party mounted the stairs, traversed the house, and set forth up the street; slowly, because those men they escorted might not take more rapid pace. Of the two, Monsieur Vignolles was the weaker from his longer confinement, and leaned heavily upon the shoulders of the Sieur Giraud. Yet within the cordon of archers about them they both carried their heads high enough, and those in the surrounding crowd of soldiery who would have jeered fell silent at the sight. Many there were, too, who knew them—who had served with the one or the other—and to these there was naught pleasing in the sight of these staggering, wounded men going to their doom.

But close behind marched Crépin with his straggling band, and to them the sight was very good.

Straight toward the market-place Chaubran led the way, his archers thrusting the curious back with small ceremony, and ere long they debouched from the narrow street into the square. A double line of archers and foot-soldiers held it on all sides; but at Chaubran's word, those before him gave way long enough for his party to pass through.

Before the steps of the town-hall the Count de Charolais and the constable sat motionless as statues in their saddles, and some paces from them the staff looked on in silence. In truth, a very hush had fallen over the place, save for the stamping of some iron-shod hoof, or the clink of a curb chain as a charger tossed up his head.

Directly before Count Charles, Chaubran halted his men and, saluting, fell back a pace so that his prisoners stood alone. Crépin edged his way forward, till he came to stand beside them.

With one accord the two captives sank to their knees before him who had been their master.

Count Charles turned to the constable.

"At all events the knave lied not to me, my lord constable," he said, "for here are the very men he swore to deliver." Then to the kneeling figures before him, "Rise, you dogs, for I would look into your faces!"

Slowly they rose; but there was naught in the steady look of either in which Count Charles could read the guilt for which he scanned their faces.

"Miserable creatures," went on Count Charles harshly, "I have had you brought before me, ere you paid the penalty of your crimes, that all might see the treatment I accord a recreant vassal, no matter what his position once may have been. You, Monsieur Vignolles, have merited death, in that, failing in a duty set you,

you chose to desert your standard and to cast your lot with a ragged band of hill cut-throats. As for you, Sieur Giraud d'Orson, mere death is inadequate to expiate your wrong, for not only did you join these cursed Companions of the Green Tent, but you conspired against my life."

"My lord count, that is a lie!" cried the Sieur Giraud, for men in his case stop not to weigh words. "Ne'er had I aught to do with such vile attempt——"

"Silence!" roared the count. "And have more heed how you speak, lest I cut you down where you stand. Ha! I marvel not you should try to save your scurvy life with lies, but I hold the proof of what I say. The letter that called me to the vine-grower's—you will scarce deny your own hand, for I know it too well to make error."

"Before God, my lord count, ne'er did I make such request of you!" cried the Sieur Giraud. "I begged only that you would accord me an early audience."

Count Charles shook his head angrily.

"I tell you your lies are of no avail," he said sharply. "I hold the letter and am fully aware of its contents. Moreover, to see the consummation of your design, you came to the vine-grower's—you and monsieur there."

"My lord count, I deny it not; but this is all some poisonous tale of this knave Crépin Brune. Search you the one who drew bow upon you that day? Then search no longer, for he it was, and he alone, who did meditate your death."

"That I know," answered the count sharply, and the hearts of the two men before him fell within them.

The Count de Charolais knew that Crépin had sought his life, yet spared him because he had delivered them into his power. In truth, then, where was the good in

further speech, since their doom was so irrevocably sealed?

The Sieur Giraud threw up his head and looked Count Charles full in the face.

"My lord count, for some years did I serve you and faithfully. For the disobedience I was guilty of I have paid, God knows, dearly enough; and I am reduced to naught. But, for all I have become, I pit not my word against that of a self-confessed and would-be assassin, nor, methinks, will Monsieur Vignolles. Let this mockery be ended, and give us the death you have decided on, rather than this dishonour."

A moment the count hesitated, then shrugged his great shoulders.

"The speech of a man from a rogue's lips," he muttered. "Yet did I not know—were the proof less strong—but, bah! 'Tis not strange a man should fight hard for life." Then turning upon them, "So shall you have the punishment suited to your crimes; yet first one thing I would know of you. The Lady Agathe was taken by your band of Companions, and afterward came to Dinant. With her was lodged the mad woman of the Ardennes, whom I would give much to lay hands on. Know you aught of their whereabouts?"

The two exchanged quick glances and felt their hearts leap high within them. Thank God, whatever their own end might be, neither the Lady Agathe nor Marcelle had been discovered to drag before this awful tribunal!

"Speak, fools!" cried Count Charles in anger. "I am in no mood for trifling!"

But not a word came from them in reply. Both knew that Crépin must have informed the count of the presence of the women at the widow Galiot's house. Both

now realised that they had fled there and taken to some other hiding-place. Was it possible that Tite alone had effected what he and the Sieur Giraud had contemplated? If so, ne'er should hint of it leave their lips.

"Stubborn knaves you are!" cried the count. "You would hold a still tongue, hoping for some reward; but that, by all the saints, you may not expect. I shall find these women, never fear, if Dinant holds them. As for you, my sentence is that you be bound together, you who are so fond of the same company, and that you be cast into the Meuse. A fitting end this is for one who has been a soldier! Perchance you will find some of your dear Companions waiting to welcome you beneath the waters yonder."

"If one dies, what matters the manner of death?" said Monsieur Vignolles. "As for the company, I ask no better," and with that he laid his hand on the Sieur Giraud's shoulder.

On a sign from the count, some foot-soldiers approached them quickly, one bearing a coil of rope.

Count Charles turned to speak to the constable.

As for Crépin, he grinned broadly from ear to ear. His hour, indeed, had come, and his eyes seemed glued to the rope the men carried.

The first man extended his hand roughly and drew the Sieur Giraud and Monsieur Vignolles together, back to back; then reached for the rope. As he did so, a disturbance arose on one side of the square of troops; a muffled shouting, and then through a break in the lines were dragged three figures.

Chaubran saluted and ran to the spot, while the rest remained speechless with amazement. For the three, whom Chaubran met half-way to the lines, were the Lady Agathe, Marcelle, and Tite.

CHAPTER XXI

DAUPHINÉ!

A LOWERING frown contorted the brows of Count Charles, and he raised his hand to check the interruption, then shrugged his huge shoulders as though thinking better of it, and waited with his dark gaze bent on the approaching party.

The Lady Agathe still wore the velvet attire she had adopted on coming to the Companions, and, though she was pale, walked firmly enough. Beside her Marcelle seemed almost puny, and her face was ghastly white, so that her great eyes seemed even larger than usual. Despite the fact that the day was warm, she shivered beneath the cloak that fell about her and trailed upon the ground. It was the property of Tite, and many sizes too large. As for Tite, he looked neither to right nor left as he marched stolidly along, yet his brow was wrinkled and perchance his figure not quite as erect as of ordinary.

Crépin's face suddenly lost its grin. What meant this new development? Why was Marcelle, whom they had so vainly sought, thrusting herself into the count's hands?

"By all the saints, 'tis the Lady Agathe!" exclaimed Count Charles, recognising her when she was near at hand.

The constable spurred his mount a pace nearer.

"But tell me not this insignificant creature with her is the mad woman of the Ardennes!" he cried. "If so, the devil is wrapped up in small enough compass. Captain Chaubran, is this the woman you saw in the hills?"

Chaubran saluted.

"This is Marcelle the Mad, my lord count," he answered, and indicated her with the point of his sword.

A frown crossed the face of the Count de Charolais. Had he had to deal with such a woman as he had imagined Marcelle, he would have felt the ground sure beneath him, but this slight figure seemed to him almost wraith-like, and he scarce knew how to begin.

"It is true, my lord count; I am Marcelle."

She herself had given him the lead, yet still when he spoke there was a certain mistrust in his tone, as though he doubted the evidence of his own senses.

"By Our Lady, I can scarce believe it!" he muttered, then spoke aloud, "You have well eluded the search that has been made for you, woman. In what remote place have you and the Lady Agathe lain hid these two days?"

A faint smile hovered over her features for a moment, and her eyes were soft with a great love as she turned and looked at Tite. Then, again, she gazed full into the face of Count Charles.

"No merit is it of mine that you have sought us in vain, my lord count," she said, "but rather of this dear heart here, who has risked his life that none might suspect our retreat."

She laid her hand softly on Tite's shoulder, then went on quickly:

"Nor was this so remote as you think, since under the same roof have been quartered Captain Chaubran and some half-dozen of his men."

Chaubran started forward and would have spoken, but the count raised his hand angrily.

"So, 'tis thus I am served!" he cried. "By my faith, if this be true, you are little better than a fool, captain! Where have your quarters been?"

"At the house of a wench named Vaucler, in the Rue Violette—a wench without a *sou*, my lord count——"

Count Charles swore a fearful oath.

"Ay, 'tis that, you fool!" he cried. "Let any one of you catch the clink of gold and there is no crevice that may escape your prying. Too busy have you been elsewhere to have eye for the treasure that lay under your very nose, and a fine chance it is that you have lost. Saints, Captain Chaubran, you would be the better for a keeper, since three people may lie hid in the same house with you!"

Chaubran hung his head in some shame at the biting tone used toward him, then made essay to better matters.

"Three of them were not hid, my lord count," he said humbly, "for this old man I do recall now, though he wears not the same look. 'Tis the brother of the woman Vaucler, so she said, who had become crack-brained with age, and fancied himself a dog. A drivelling imbecile he was, forsooth, who slept on straw in a wretched loft above, and barked and spat in the face of any who ventured near his ladder. Saints! 'tis not I who would approach such beast, for 'tis the kind that possess the touch of the Evil One. Yet the man is not the same now, and I knew him not at first sight."

He looked intently at Tite, and over the face of the latter came a grim smile.

"Ha! Small doubt which of the two of you was the

imbecile!" said Count Charles, and waved Chaubran aside. "As for you, old man," he went on to Tite, "we shall find a way to quiet that bark of yours, methinks."

Then he again turned to Marcelle.

"Sooner or later I would have found you, in any case," he said sharply; "yet I see not why you should come to seek the death that awaits you, woman. Mad as you call yourself, you can scarce hope for aught else."

Her answer came quick and sure.

"No, my lord count; I come not to plead for a mercy I may not expect. Full well do I know that my blood alone may atone for such enmity as I have borne your house. Freely do I confess my offence, and willingly shall I discharge my debt, for I have no wish to live. But first I would meet another obligation that God imposes upon me, the obligation to acquit the fair name of two men as unjustly accused as e'er were men in this world."

She paused and extended her hand toward the Sieur Giraud and Monsieur Vignolles.

Crépin's face went white with the fear that now swept over him, as he heard the measured words fall from her lips.

"You undertake more than you can accomplish, woman," said Count Charles. "The proofs are too clear to admit of doubt."

"Yet I pray that you will hear me, my lord count," she answered, "for 'tis for this hour alone I have wished to live; and surely, 'tis small favour to grant one who dies so soon."

A groan burst from Tite, and the tears coursed down his furrowed cheeks.

"Proceed!" said the count coldly. "I will hear your tale."

Marcelle inclined her head in thanks, then went on quickly:

"Then must I take you back to a day over a fortnight ago, my lord count—a day when, in the hills yonder, I overheard talk between two men, who plotted against your life. One of these men was of my own band, Crépin Brune here; the other came from your own camp at Namur."

"Ay, the Sieur Giraud d'Orson!" exclaimed Count Charles.

"No; for then he had been some days with us," she answered. "The man was one I ne'er had seen before, and he came at the behest of some one high in power, since he spoke of his master as 'my lord.'"

"Ha! This begins to be of interest!" cried the count.

The constable bent forward to adjust his stirrup leather.

"There, with naught between us save a screen of green leaves, I heard the plan arranged that was to do you to death," continued Marcelle. "The Sieur Giraud was to be induced by Crépin Brune to write you a letter, praying for an interview on the ground that he could deliver Gaspard Lenoir into your hands. That, you know, my lord count; but you know not that the appointment at the vine-grower's was added by this man who came to the hills that day."

"By God, there is a ring of truth in what this woman says, my lord!" exclaimed the count, turning to the constable. "Noted you aught in that letter that would indicate that two hands had written it?"

The constable shook his head.

"My lord count, the woman is lying!" whined Crépin. "'Twas the Sieur Giraud and none other, as I told you, who——"

"Silence!" cried the count, and motioned Marcelle to proceed.

"In our camp, a little later, I saw the Sieur Giraud write this letter," she went on; "I saw Crépin come to him and the letter pass from one to the other, and I know that 'twas given to the man from Namur, who waited."

"With no hindrance from you, I'll be sworn," said the count grimly.

"My lord count, I am not here to clear myself," she answered. "No; naught did I put in the way of this plan, for then, above all things, did I desire its success. But pray hear me out. At the vine-grower's you know what happened. Crépin Brune was hid in the thicket, and I with him, for I had stolen after him when he left the camp. Through a broken bow-string, his design failed; broken it was, because I, at a price that well-nigh robbed me of honour, bought the privilege of remaining with him long enough to gnaw it nearly in two."

Crépin gasped aloud.

The Sieur Giraud started forward and strained his gaze upon her.

"Marcelle!" he cried. "My God, how I have wronged you!"

A moment she looked at him, and smiled.

"You ask me to believe too much, woman," said the count. "You have said that you burned with impatience for my undoing, yet would have me believe that two days later you saved my life."

"Ay, for in that time the Lady Agathe had come

into my life, and taught me that my way was not God's way," replied Marcelle gently. "She showed me the horror of this crime they planned, and brought a flood of light upon me that ne'er had I seen before. To bring her into the hills as I did was cruel, cruel; but, thank God it was so, for through her the way has opened clear before me!"

The count looked searchingly at the Lady Agathe.

"It is God's truth she speaks, my lord count," she said. "On the honour of my name, I swear it."

"Yet these two were present at the vine-grower's. With my own eyes I saw them," he persisted, pointing to the two men.

"Whither they had gone to make arrangement for my lodging there till I might leave the country for Dauphiné," said the Lady Agathe. "That they happened there at such an hour was due, in the case of the Sieur Giraud, to sheer chance. Monsieur Vignolles went, because of what I told him of this conspiracy, and to prevent it, if possible. For then I, too, believed in the guilt of the Sieur Giraud."

Count Charles brought his hand heavily down upon his pommel.

"By God, I do believe this tale!" he cried. "Blind have I been, in truth, since such hellish contrivance could be hatched within my own lines. Yet not the vestige of a clew is there on which I may lay my hand. The man who came to the hills spoke of his master as 'my lord.' Saints! how many such are there within my sight, even now!"

He swept his hand toward the motionless staff, then turned upon Crépin.

"Yet you know the name of this master your accomplice served," he roared. "Out with it!"

"'Tis all a lie, my lord count!" cried Crépin. "There was no such man."

He took the only course that offered him life. But the sweat oozed from him at every pore. How different his position from that he had thought by now to occupy.

The constable leaned over and muttered some words in the count's ear. They had the effect of diverting his attention again to Marcelle.

"Woman," he said, "I believe your tale, for the ring of truth is in your voice, and it fits well with what I know. And well it is for some of you others that it is so. Monsieur Vignolles, because I believe the Lady Agathe's word that you would have prevented that plot, you shall go free. As for you, my lady, you have, it seems, chosen to consort with thieves rather than return to my protection. If you could have gone to the vine-grower's, you as well could have gone to Namur; but you avoided that because fearful of the marriage I contemplated for you. So be it; the penalty shall be fitting. Before the setting of the sun you shall wed Monsieur Vignolles, for there is no worse punishment than the joining of an ill-assorted pair. After that, betake yourselves to Dauphiné, or where you will, for I'll have none such as you at court."

"My lord—" cried Monsieur Vignolles, looking up from his knee, to which he had fallen.

Too great a joy was in his face to please the Lady Agathe, and she interrupted him in some haste.

"Too much have I endured to withstand your will longer, my lord count," she said demurely, and the colour was high in her cheek.

"'Tis well you are, at last, aware that my will is not to be thwarted," he replied shortly, and turned to Marcelle.

"Whatever you have been, woman, you shall not find me ungrateful for the service you have rendered," he said. "Some moments ago I would have laughed at the idea of sparing this Marcelle the Mad. You have earned your life. At the hour of four the women leave the town. Join them. But for you, Sieur Giraud, I have no mercy. You are not guilty of all that I had thought; but you have well merited death by becoming a very leader of these outlaws. Also, you saw fit to lay hands on Captain Chaubran, and wellnigh throttle him, when he went upon my service. For this you shall die."

Marcelle gave a quick cry.

"My lord count, I seek not my life! I pray you let the Sieur Giraud go."

"I have spoken," he answered.

A moment she stood with the horror rising into her face, then took a step toward him.

"Then, my lord count, since you demand this man's life, I, too, demand fulfilment of your word," she cried. "You have offered five-score lives for that of Gaspard Lenoir. I ask but one, that of the Sieur Giraud d'Orson. Your word you cannot break, my lord count, and here—here is the price you ask, Gaspard Lenoir himself."

With a quick jerk she threw the cloak from her shoulders and, tossing her cap after it, shook the dark mass of her hair about her face.

From coarse blouse to heavy shoes she was a replica of that Lenoir who had addressed the people from the steps of the town-hall, save for the bare upper lip and some inexplicable change of feature.

For a time no one spoke, but stood gazing at the transformation.

"Is this true?" cried Count Charles finally.

Tite groaned aloud.

"True it is, my lord count," he said. "I knew naught of it myself till this day when she sent me to the old witch's in the Rue Basse for the clothes. Oh, have pity on her, my lord—have pity! 'Tis but a child!"

"My lord count, I hold you to your word!" cried Marcelle.

"I pray you end all this, my lord," cried the Sieur Giraud. "I will not have my life at such a price."

"God's truth, what hatred of my race—what can inspire such hatred?" exclaimed the count.

Marcelle looked him straight in the eye.

"You ask it? Then shall you know, my lord count," she answered. "Two years ago, in the palace at Bruges, there was a Madame de Courtray—a widow and her daughter. Ah, I see you recall the name, though she was but a humble needle-woman, and you ne'er laid eyes upon her but once. Monseigneur had gone to take residence at Hesdin, and you, my lord, held full sway at Bruges. Let me pass over it quickly. You know how a certain nobleman of the court, failing in his designs against this poor woman, informed you the exact opposite. You chose to believe his word rather than hers, and sent her forth into the world, even as you are sending these other women to-day. With the daughter, whom you had never seen, she made her way to Liège, changing her name to Lenoir, that the stain you had cast upon her character might not pursue her. But always, always, it gnawed at her heart, till a half-year ago she proved ready prey for the fever then raging at Liège, and died in her child's arms. I was that child, my lord count—left alone in the world with none to care whether I followed her or not. By chance, an old woman who lives yonder in the Rue Basse was in Liège at the time, and, finding me

thus, brought me to Dinant. Here all hated your name, and I more than any of them. In a mad moment the thought of assuming man's attire struck me, for so I might join the wretched rabble and go about with greater safety, and the old woman showed me how to change my features with chalks and made me a false growth of hair for the lip. By night this served well enough, and ne'er did I appear in such garb by day. You had driven my mother forth with the worst stamp that may be set upon woman, into poverty and death. Do you still marvel, my lord count, that I should have raved against you; that I should willingly have sought your life, or that I should have helped cast over the walls of Bouvignes that effigy with its bar sinister? It was unwomanly and coarse, but, my God, what was your treatment of me?"

Count Charles tapped his pommel sharply, but found difficulty in arranging his thoughts.

"For the rest, I have lived the wild life of the hills, for I took to it gladly," went on Marcelle quietly. "None of the band knew that Gaspard Lenoir and I were one till I told Tite to-day. Had I my life to live again I would do differently, for I have come to know that vengeance is but of small moment. But my race is run. Thank God that, worthless as it is, my life may yet save another's! I am ready, my lord count. You may not renounce your word."

A great earnestness was in her eyes, and the count seemed to turn to avoid her look.

"I do not renounce my word," he said.

"My lord, I beg of you pay her no heed!" cried the Sieur Giraud. "Good God, I cannot accept my life in this way!"

The count raised himself in the saddle and looked hard at Marcelle.

"You would die for this man, Marcelle de Courtray—and why?"

A moment she hesitated, then, with a wonderful light in her great eyes, spoke so gently that they could scarce catch her words.

"Ay, I would die for him were it not one life I had to give, but more than you offered in exchange for poor Lenoir. O God, I have crowded it down in my heart till the very barriers may hold no longer; nor need they now, for the confession of a dying woman may do no one an injury. I would die because I love this man with a passion that seems to bear me into the very air."

She turned and seemed to forget the others' presence, and the light of her eyes fell upon the Sieur Giraud.

"It is the impossible, I know," she said softly, "yet hear it as the last word of one who will soon be gone. That first day in the hills when you came to me broken, disheartened, and ready to welcome death, it surged into my heart. If I kept you to the oath you had sworn it was because my very soul clung to yours and all the light of the world would have been gone with your release. How I yearned for one word of that love my own love seemed to merit! How the mere touch of your hand thrilled me from head to foot! But you, Sieur Giraud—you had no thought for me. You saw naught in what I did or said but the madness you believed possessed me, and so would pass me by. Yet still I would not give up hope. What manner of woman was it that could rouse your love? To learn this I seized the Lady Agathe and had her brought to me. Could I poison her mind against you, perchance you would spare thought for me. I did and still I was naught; I was not given a thought; I was something beneath you, low as you had fallen—Marcelle the Outcast, Marcelle the Mad. I know it now.

It came to me the same night some one stoned me as I ran through the streets, so that barely had I strength to change from Lenoir to Marcelle and reach the house. Then I gave up the fight and longed to die. Yet even now my lord count bestows the one you love on another. I am sorry, Sieur Giraud; I am sorry; but I have done what I could. Forgive me for all I have done against you, for I have been blind to all save the love that mastered me, and my very reason was torn to shreds with hopeless longing."

With no thought of the time and place the Sieur Giraud dashed the archers from him and sprang to her side.

"No, no, Marcelle, it is not you who have been blind, dear heart," he cried, and took her in his arms, "but thank God that my own eyes at last are open. It has never been the Lady Agathe; never since that day when you came to me at my post on the hills yonder. Plain enough is it now, dear; yet then did I delude myself with vain hopes, so that all else was blurred to my sight. Marcelle, look up, dearest, look up, that you may read in my eyes the light that has come upon me. I love you, Marcelle, I love you."

Yet it was not Marcelle who looked up into his eyes, for, as the glowing sun opens the petals of the lily, so had his words transformed her into some radiant spirit.

"O God!" she murmured, and her eyes sought the blue above.

Then she lay quite quiet in his arms, and the eyes of the two clung together. They dreamed not that they were not alone.

Count Charles sat motionless before them, and his look was far away.

Of a sudden Crépin sprang forward.

"My lord count, my lord count, yonder is the man I met in the wood—yonder, behind the archers!"

Faced now with certain death, the man's eye had by chance lit upon the messenger who had come into the Ardennes to arrange with him for the count's death. It was a last desperate chance and instinctively he leaped forward.

The ugly knife in his hand he had drawn some moments before—against the time when they should seize him—and kept concealed beneath his jerkin. Now, in his excitement at sight of the man as he sprang forward, he drew it forth and raised it high to point the man out to Count Charles.

The great sword of the constable rasped from its sheath, flashed in the dying sunlight, and descended full upon Crépin's head.

An instant he tottered, then the knife flew from his hand and he fell in a huddled heap, his skull split from crown to chin.

Count Charles, who had turned to follow Crépin's first gesture, faced about in time to see this.

The constable silently pointed to the fallen knife.

A moment Count Charles sat quiet, then said coolly:

"Yes, methinks you struck in good time, my lord constable, and I must thank you for my life. Yet now we may not know whose man it was who went into the hills on such errand. 'Tis a pity."

The constable shrugged his shoulders and shot his blade home softly.

At that moment the great bell over their heads sounded the hour of four.

Instantly the archers on one side of the square opened out to afford passage from the street behind. The sharp roll of drums mingled with the blare of trumpets,

and from far away up the street came a low moaning sound.

The count threw his head up, and Tite chancing to catch his eye, he cried:

"Seize that man! For what he has done I fix his price at two hundred golden crowns. If he may not pay it let him be sold like the others for what he will fetch."

The Lady Agathe stepped forward quickly.

"At the price you set I claim the man, my lord count," she said quietly. "I shall find use for him in Dauphiné."

The count bowed coldly, and turned his attention to the procession now entering the square. Alas, what a pitiful progress this!

Between two unyielding lines of mounted men-at-arms marched these forlorn and wailing women of Dinant, with such of their possessions as might find lodgment on their drooping backs. With them, boys and maidens, adding their shrill clamour to the scene, and toddling little ones wide-eyed with wonder at these strange doings, and clinging, as best they might, to their mothers' kirtles. Oh, miserable beings! what—what is there left in life for you?

And now as they draw nearer, here are Petite Maman and Bonne Fleuron in the very van, looking in vain for that aid Crépin had promised them. Among the others, the widow Galiot and Madame Vaucler rending the air with their cries and lamentations.

Small wonder it was that hardened, rough men on the staff should turn their heads from such scene.

The Sieur Giraud felt Marcelle tremble within his arms. As for their fate, he made no doubt that Count Charles meant death for both of them now, yet a great peace was upon the two, and they scarce noticed when

the procession came to a halt on a sign from the count. But something in the sudden silence that ensued made them both look up.

The count's eye was upon them. Without a word he motioned them to join the sad throng.

"Dauphiné!" muttered Monsieur Vignolles, "Dauphiné!"

The next moment they were within the lines of steel, the Sieur Giraud holding Marcelle close to his breast, as he might have carried one of the children at his side. The trumpets again sounded their brazen notes, the wailing began afresh, and on—on moved the heaving multitude toward the gates and the dread despair without.

The dying sun hung red over the hills before them, yet, to two hearts amidst all this anguish, it boded not the coming of the darkness. To them the sky was radiant with the growing dawn—the dawn of hope—of life, of love—and ever in their ears the soft wind from the plain whispered, "Dauphiné! Dauphiné!"

(1)

THE END

The Reckoning.

By ROBERT W. CHAMBERS.

The author's intention is to treat, in a series of four or five romances, that part of the war for independence which particularly affected the great landed families of northern New York, the Johnsons, represented by Sir William, Sir John, Guy Johnson, and Colonel Claus; the notorious Butlers, father and son, the Schuylers, Van Rensselaers, and others.

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ROBERT W. CHAMBERS.

NEW YORK, *May 26, 1904.*

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If I recollect, his dismal confession runs something like this:

"It was in bleak November
When I slew them, I remember,
As I caught them unawares
Drinking tea in rocking-chairs."

And so he talked them to death, the subject being "What Really Is Art?" Afterward he was sorry—

"The squeak of a door,
The creak of a floor,
My horrors and fears enhance;
And I wake with a scream
As I hear in my dream
The shrieks of my maiden aunts!"

Now it is a very dreadful thing to suggest that those highly respectable pseudo-spinsters, the Sister Arts, supposedly cozily immune in their polygamous chastity (for every suitor for favor is popularly expected to be wedded to his particular art)—I repeat, it is very dreadful to suggest that these impeccable old ladies are in danger of being talked to death.

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Let us find comfort in the ancient proverb: "Art talked to death shall rise again." Let us also recollect that "Dinky is as dinky does;" that "All is not Shaw that Bernards;" that "Better Yeates than Clever;" that words are so inexpensive that there is no moral crime in robbing Henry to pay James.

Firmly believing all this, abjuring all atom-pickers, slab furniture, and woodchuck literature—save only the immortal verse:

"And there the wooden-chuck doth tread;
While from the oak trees' tops
The red, red squirrel on the head
The frequent acorn drops."

Abjuring, as I say, dinkiness in all its forms, we may still hope that those cleanly and respectable spinsters, the Sister Arts, will continue throughout the ages, rocking and drinking tea unterrified by the million-tongued clamor in the back yard and below stairs, where thumb and forefinger continue the question demanded by intellectual exhaustion:

"L'arr! Kesker say l'arr?"

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